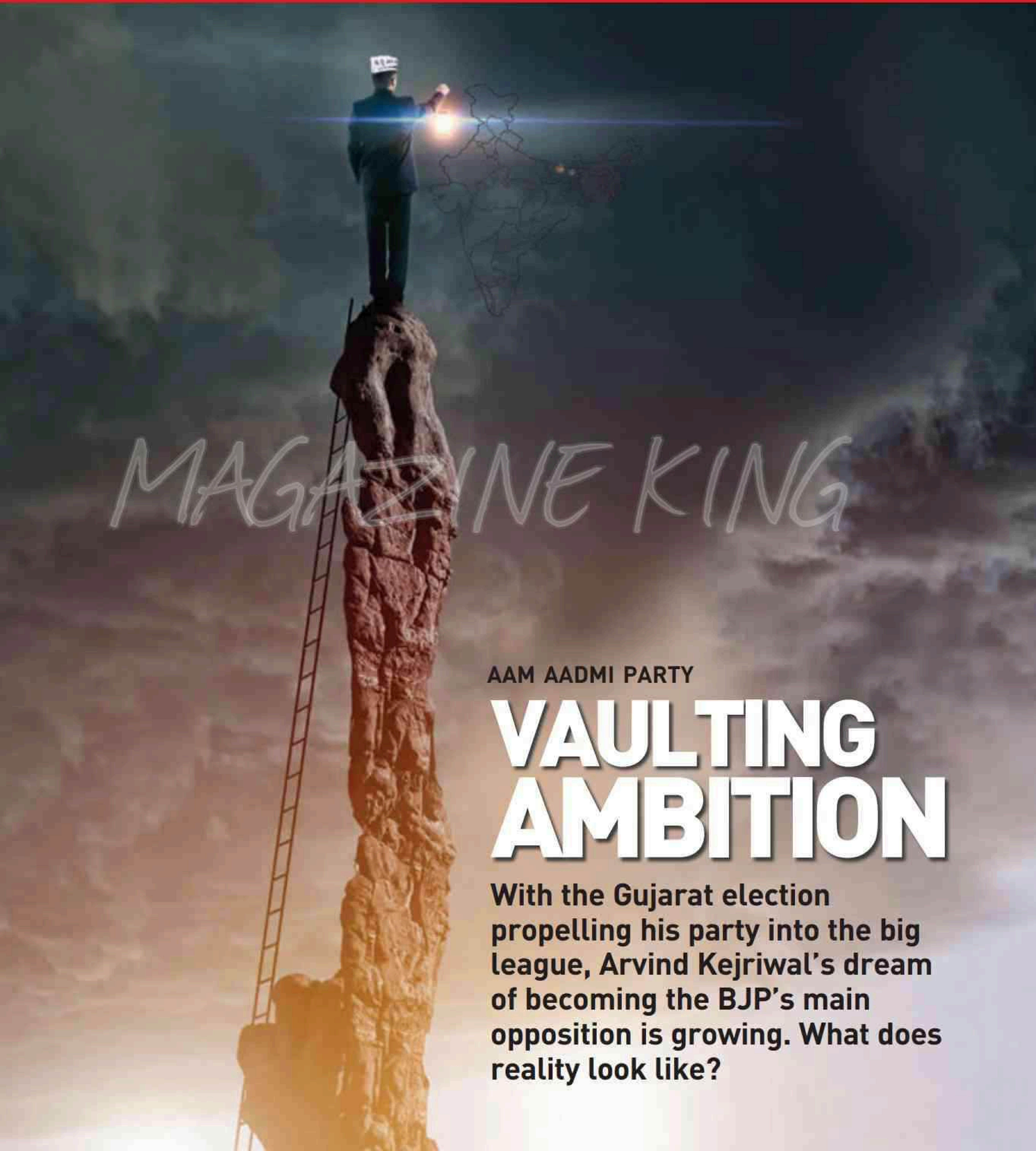
CONTROVERSY BORDER ROW
Battle over Belgaum **38**

CULTURE KOLKATA
Dover Lane music fest **76**

FRONTLINE

JANUARY 13, 2023 INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM RS.125



AAM AADMI PARTY

VAULTING AMBITION

With the Gujarat election propelling his party into the big league, Arvind Kejriwal's dream of becoming the BJP's main opposition is growing. What does reality look like?

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

FRONTLINE

VOLUME 39 NO. 27 DECEMBER 31, 2022-JANUARY 13, 2023 ISSN 0970-1710 HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM 116 PAGES

GUEST COLUMN
Sukumar Muralidharan: The prohibition debate 29

POLITICS

Karnataka: Wooing Vokkaligas 31
Bihar: BJP's Pasmanda gamble 34
Interview: Shahnawaz Hussain 36

CONTROVERSY
Border tangle over Belgaum 38

SOCIAL ISSUES

No place for the Gutti Koya tribe to call home 42

INTERVIEW
Ravi Nair & Paranjoy Guha Thakurta on Rafale deal 47

SPOTLIGHT
West Bengal: A death in CBI custody 50

ECONOMY
RBI launches digital rupee 55

LEGISLATION
Amendments to the Wildlife Act fail elephants 58

WORLD AFFAIRS
Tensions rising in Korean peninsula 60
Sri Lanka: Temples being targeted 63

COVER STORY

Regional gains, national aim

The AAP's growth and metamorphosis as a national alternative to the Congress has been built around its recent electoral gains in Punjab and Gujarat, but critics are wary of the party's slide to the Right with its "soft Hindutva" appeal. 6

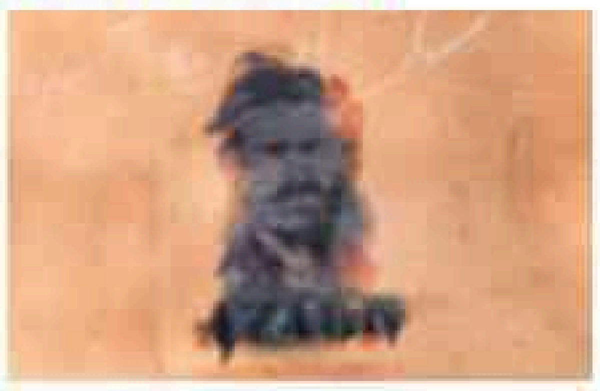
RELATED STORIES
The pragmatic party 12
Failing in Himachal, Haryana 20
Deafening silence 21
On the ascendant 23
Interview: Sandeep Pathak 26

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES
COVER DESIGN: B. SRINIVASAN

ENVIRONMENT
Maharashtra: Bullet train project vs mangroves 68

CULTURE
Kochi's biennale blues 73
Kolkata's iconic Dover Lane Music Conference 76

PHOTO ESSAY



Walls of defiance 80

ART
Aban Raza's emphatically social paintings 90

WHITE SPACE
The art of running between raindrops 110

COLUMN
C.P. Chandrasekhar: The pension debate 52
Ganesh Devy: Small-print India 71
Prathyush Parasuraman: All that glitters 94

SCIENCE NOTEBOOK 66

BOOKS 96

SHOWCASE 112

KASHMIR DIARY 113

QUIZ 114

LETTERS 4

Air Surcharge:
Colombo - Rs.20.00 and
Port Blair - Rs.15.00

For subscription queries and delivery related issues Contact: Pan-India Toll Free No: 1800 102 1878 or customercare@thehindu.co.in
For advertisements: E-mail: sivakumar.m@thehindu.co.in, Phone: 98415 85969

Disclaimer: Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine.THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.

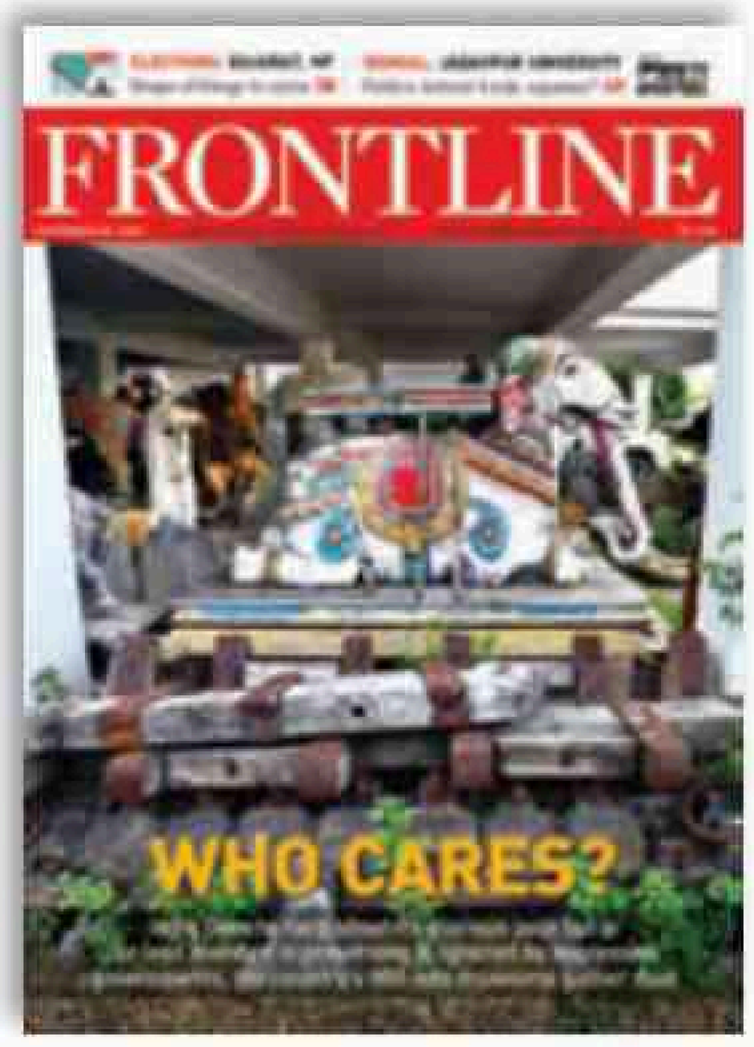
Published by N. RAVI, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Limited, Survey No. 185, Kondapur, Ranga Reddy District-500 133, Telangana on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

EDITOR: VAISHNA ROY (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act). All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

e-mail: frontline@thehindu.co.in

Frontline is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites.

Museums



TASNEEM ZAKARIA MEHTA laid bare the facts of museums and what is needed to maintain them (Cover Story, December 30). She gave a broad perspective of the significance of museums. They are not merely holders of artefacts, worn-out drawings, mute statues, and the like but reflect the evolution of the human race, the animal kingdom, and so on. In this era when there is "rewriting history" for social polarisation, the protection, development, and reorganisation of museums are more relevant than ever before. The promotion of museums through adequate funding and proper policies will pay rich dividends to the country.

B. RAJASEKARAN
BENGALURU

Prisoners

PEOPLE from marginalised communities being imprisoned for years without proper trial or investigation is nothing short of tyranny. ("Long forgotten", December 30). This inhumanity and injustice cause those stuck behind bars for years, most of whom are SCs, STs, or OBC Muslims, great mental and physical distress. Is their life not as precious as that of the rich and well connected? The government needs to come up with a bail system that everyone can afford and that guarantees speedy justice to all.

FAIZAN RAZA
CHEMMAD, KERALA

IN her valedictory address at the Constitution Day celebrations held by the Supreme Court, President Droupadi Murmu spoke of the profound injustice visited upon the hapless undertrials languishing in prisons. That three-fourths of India's prisoners are undertrials speaks volumes about the incompetence of our justice-serving systems. The fact that the lion's share of those undertrials come from underprivileged communities explains why there is a laid-back approach to addressing the grave crisis.

AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH
ARANMULA, KERALA

Reservation

THE Supreme Court judgment that upheld the 103rd amendment granting 10 per cent reservation for the economically weaker sections (EWS) has stirred up a hornet's nest ("Of deprivation, past and present", December 30). Confining the EWS reservation to forward communities is a lopsided decision as the majority of the EWS are in the SC/ST and backward communities. Denying them the benefits of income-based reservation will only push them further down the social hierarchy and defeat the very purpose of reservation.

The makers of the Constitution saw reservation as a means to remove social backwardness and the stigma attached to marginalised communities and to bring them into the mainstream of societal development. Reservation was never conceived as a tool for economic development. Financial backwardness is the wrong metric to apply with regard to implementing reservation. If the government goes ahead with the 10 per cent reservation for the EWS, it should extend it to SCs, STs, and OBCs also so that the entire exercise will be balanced. As of now the balance is skewed towards the forward communities.

T.N. VENUGOPALAN
KOCHI, KERALA

China

THE world has been in a churn since the coronavirus outbreak ("Season of change", December 30). It has been causing big health problems worldwide and should be tackled by all countries collectively without assigning blame. China has many educated people and is a hub of education, attracting many students from across the world. And they all should be encouraged to carry out research in the health sector to put an end to such deadly diseases. Now, all of China and the world should think ahead and act through cooperation and use technology and scientific methods to kill viruses such as the coronavirus.

P. SENTHIL SARAVANA DURAI
MUMBAI

Assembly elections

THE BJP's humongous victory in Gujarat ensures the continuation of its dream run ("Clear winners", December 30). Its success can be attributed to the unabated popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the party's clear electoral strategy. The fact that the BJP was able to buck the anti-incumbency trend in Gujarat and retain power is both significant and creditable. The Congress had its worst ever performance in the State's electoral history. It seems to be out of sync with reality. The election of a new party president and the Bharat Jodo Yatra had little effect on voters.

In Himachal Pradesh the Congress' focus on local issues resulted in success. However, its victory in the hill State, which has alternated between the Congress and the BJP, cannot offset its rout in Gujarat. The AAP, which led a high-profile campaign in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, flattered to deceive.

B. SURESH KUMAR
COIMBATORE, TAMIL NADU

Governors

IN the parliamentary system of democracy, Governors play a useful and crucial role, but they lose their value when they become agents of a political party ("Weaponising the Governor", December 16). The solution to this lies in enacting a law that lets the members of both the ruling and opposition parties in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament to elect Governors and

Deputy Governors from a list of candidates provided by them for only two five-year terms. Biased Governors or Deputy Governors should be impeached. This will ensure that Governors are impartial.

PETER CASTELLINO
MUMBAI

THE Governor is a constitutional head bound by the advice of the legislature, while the Chief Minister is the executive head of the State. Governors are supposed to be a bridge between the State government and the Union government and are not expected to act as agents of the Union government in opposition-ruled States; run a parallel government; harass, target, and belittle the legislature; or act like a governor general of the East India Company or a Viceroy during British rule. The presence of Governors in every State is part of British legacy, which Union governments are following faithfully. Their powers have not been diluted a bit. They create perennial problems for the Chief Ministers concerned. The Governors not only dance to the tune of the Union government but are hell-bent on promoting the agenda of the RSS, which does not augur well for the world's biggest democracy.

M.Y. SHARIFF
CHENNAI

Kashmir

IF Great Britain had had any sense of responsibility towards the people it ruled, it would have created some seven workable countries instead of just one in August 1947 ("How Nehru handled Kashmir", December 16). In this way, 90 per cent of India's existing problems, all created by power-crazy politicians, would have been avoided. The present situation is an unworkable occupation and annexation of hundreds of heterogeneous kingdoms that is mistakenly called integration by free will and touted as the choice of princely states.

V.N. RAMASWAMY
HYDERABAD

Vizhinjam port

BEACHES are community assets and should not be given to multinational companies in the name of development ("Port in deep water", December 16). The fisherfolk of Vizhinjam are living under the threat of being evicted from their natural habitat because of the Adani Group's proposed Vizhinjam port project near Thiruvananthapuram. This innovative project can adversely affect biodiversity and aggravate coastal erosion, which has already affected the lives of the fisherfolk. It is a painful fact that the government did not pay heed to the dangerous consequences that could befall the environment. The need of the hour is promotion of development that goes hand in hand with the conservation of biodiversity.

JERMY JOSEPH
HAZARIBAG, JHARKHAND

ANNOUNCEMENT

Letters, whether by surface mail or e-mail, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials.

Editor's note

SWEEPING the Municipal Corporation of Delhi elections and then grabbing 13 per cent of the vote share in Gujarat have put a fresh gust of wind into the AAP's sails. It has become eligible for national party status, it has decided to contest all the seats in the upcoming Rajasthan elections, and Arvind Kejriwal seems to be already polishing his prime ministerial ambitions.

One has watched the AAP's rise with a degree of anticipation because the absence of a strong opposition is a matter of deep concern for anyone invested in India's democratic credentials, and any party that can don that role against a monolith sworn to wiping out everything in its path deserves our attention.

But even as the AAP gains more wins, one notices that Arvind Kejriwal is quick to throw overboard any ideological ballast that threatens to slow down his party's rise. This is cause for concern. It would be a pale pretence of an opposition indeed that will not see the deep ethical flaws in a ruling party's decisions nor be willing to call out communal dog-whistling and discrimination when they occur nor, indeed, be willing to speak up in the face of extreme injustice.

To insist that political parties be shorn of hypocrisy is to ask for a mythical creature, but to ask for a political credo is the very least one can demand. The AAP has not shown us its credo yet. To helm two of India's most powerful States and not yet be able or willing to reveal its governing philosophy is quite something. Whether it points to the AAP's debility or to the BJP's might is as yet unclear.

As the old year draws the curtains and retires, *Frontline* analyses this new sun rising in Delhi.

And while doing so we make a few wishes. That the phrase "lesser of the two evils" will not become the reigning sentiment behind 2023's choices. That we will magically be able to usher in an era of responsible politics that puts its weight behind all communities and classes and tribes and castes that make up India. That India will become less polarised and more compassionate. That every decision we take will recall the face of the poorest and the weakest Indian. And that we will stop mistaking bullying for strength, mania for conviction, and empty vanities for a life lived fully.

I thank the stellar team at *Frontline* for putting in their best fortnight after fortnight. Without them, the magazine would not be possible. And I wish them a wonderful new year filled with even more *chai-biskut*.

And to our readers, thank you for your unstinting support. You make good journalism possible at a time when populist journalism is so much easier. For you, we will always go that extra mile.

Happy 2023.

Vaishna Roy

COVER STORY

Regional gains, national aim

The AAP's growth and metamorphosis as a national alternative to the Congress is being built around its recent electoral gains in Punjab and Gujarat, but critics are wary of the party's slide to the Right with its "soft Hindutva" appeal.

BY **ANANDO BHAKTO**

THE AAM AADMI PARTY'S (AAP) IMPRESSIVE debut in the hitherto bipolar electoral fray in Gujarat is being interpreted variously by political observers. Those who had given up on the Congress as a spent force, lacking the vigour for a head-on collision with the BJP, a perception bolstered by the party's tepid campaign in Gujarat, are looking at Arvind Kejriwal as a plausible alternative. Others are alarmed by his slide to the Right and dismiss his party as a "spoiler", essentially helping the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by fragmenting opposition votes. In Gujarat, the AAP's nearly 13 per cent vote share has led to the Congress' vote share plummeting from 41.4 per cent in 2017 to 27.28 per cent in 2022.

Yet, nobody can deny that the AAP's metamorphosis from a political start-up, floated in 2012 as a new-age revolution against corruption and cynicism, to a national party in just 10 years is phenomenal, and that Arvind Kejriwal, once a fledgling anti-establishment poster boy, has shape-shifted into a deft politician swiftly. There are other attributes that make him a potential Prime Minister contender: He is young, a Hindi heartlander, and as Delhi's Chief Minister he has a list of accomplishments in the health and education sectors that attest to his capacity to deliver. Like Narendra Modi, he is self-made, so when his time comes, he can borrow Modi's "*naamdar versus kaamdar*" jibe to best "entitled" opponents.

But his proclivity to play both sides of the ideological spectrum, donning a liberal raiment with impetus on creating a welfare state, while not-so-quietly embracing some of the Right's focal talking points, be it the uniform civil code or illegal immigration, raise questions on his ability to offer a positive vision for the future, especially when a deeply polarised society is in dire need of a compassionate leadership. How can he defeat the BJP without questioning its Hindu majoritarian ideology, ask his critics. In headliner incidents concerning the minorities, such as the controversial remissions in the Bilkis Bano case, the AAP's articulation is muted. This is the outcome of a growing realisation that the core opposition voters, particularly the minorities, need no pandering as they would rally around whoever has potential to take on Narendra Modi.

AAP MLA Saurabh Bhardwaj, who spoke to *Frontline*, made light of the party's critics. "The so-called critics are prone to getting trapped in the narrative created by the BJP for them. We are not here to earn appreciation from those who have been advising the Congress for a long time, and evidently, their advice has not helped it in any way," he contended, adding, "We know how to take on the BJP".

> In the AAP's calculations, it is not necessary to confront Hindu nationalism to defeat its purveyors.

CO-OPTING HINDUTVA

In the AAP's calculations, it is not necessary to confront Hindu nationalism to defeat its purveyors. In private conversations, its leaders say that the only way to fragment the BJP-RSS' formidable social coalition is to co-opt elements from within it. They indicate that Kejriwal is likely to project himself increasingly as both a Hindu nationalist and an economic populist, seeking to attract voters with bread-and-butter economic issues, caring little about their ideological affiliations.

According to the AAP, Modi is not immune to anti-incumbency, but the Congress' and the regional satraps' baggage of alleged "appeasement politics", perceived lack of commitment to the national interest, which today is interchangeable with a commitment to placing the social and political interests of Hindus at the top, and their inability to offer solutions for the economy dissuade voters from abandoning Modi.

Says an AAP party insider: "The people, particularly the middle class, wants to defect, but it's just that they

G.R.N. SOMASHEKAR

IN BENGALURU, MAY 2018, leaders of non-BJP parties gather in front of the Vidhana Soudha. According to the AAP, Modi is not immune to anti-incumbency, but the Congress' and the regional satraps' baggage of alleged "appeasement politics", perceived lack of commitment to the national interest, and their inability to offer solutions for the economy dissuade voters from abandoning Modi.

ARVIND KEJRIWAL, DELHI CHIEF MINISTER and national coordinator of the AAP, during a roadshow in Gujarat on November 6. Kejriwal is likely to project himself increasingly as both a Hindu nationalist and an economic populist.

don't want to defect to a disintegrating Congress or an amalgam of Mamata [Banerjee], Nitish [Kumar], Akhilesh [Yadav] and Tejashwi [Yadav] who, they suspect, would end the Hindu hegemony seen in the Modi years or unduly favour the minorities." He is quick to add: "We don't have such a label."

The AAP's rightward tack is increasingly noticeable. Even when the party talks about economy, it carefully laces its articulation with a Hindu-first undertone. On the occasion of Deepavali 2022, Kejriwal wrote a letter to the Prime Minister lamenting the state of the economy and demanding that the pictures of Hindu deities Lakshmi and Ganesha be inscribed in the Indian currency. "A confluence of right policy, hard work, and gods' blessings will put our nation on the path of progress," he emphasised. The former IITian, 54, only partly conceals his disdain for an anti-Modi front. "Gathering political leaders will not make an alliance that can make India number one. We must gather all 130 crore people of India to make this country number one," he averred.

FOCUSSED PURSUIT

Those who know Kejriwal say he has a "laser focussed objective to becoming the Prime Minister" and that he can be "ruthless in that pursuit". But what would be his strategy to vault to national prominence? General discussions with AAP leaders and workers and journalists who had in the past counselled Kejriwal give the impression of a two-fold trajectory: Taking on the Congress in 2024, and the BJP in 2029.

The AAP is aiming to replace the Congress in the States, particularly wherever the grand old party is in a straight contest with the BJP. This is easier said than done, but the underlying thinking is that even if it manages to nibble some of the Congress votes, such as in Gujarat, or earlier in Goa where it polled 6.8 per cent votes, helping the BJP's Pramod Sawant retain the State, a message would be relayed that the Congress is incapable of winning, boosting the AAP's prospects. In

PTI

an interaction with *Frontline*, Amanatullah Khan, AAP legislator from Okhla, admits this is the plan. "In Gujarat, we showed it is the AAP, not the Congress, which can battle the BJP fiercely; we will win the State in 2027."

The AAP is hopeful that if it can add a couple of States to its kitty, Kejriwal's elevation as Modi's nearest opponent could be as early as in 2024. That is an unrealistic assessment, especially when Rahul Gandhi is shedding his "reluctant-politician" tag with an arduous pan-India foot march. But few are ready to bet that the Congress or a potential third front can oust Modi in 2024, or even drastically reduce his majority. The AAP is readying itself to seize that moment. "Ultimately, it would be Modi versus Kejriwal," says Amanatullah Khan.

The veteran journalist M.D. Nalapat, currently director, Department of Geopolitics at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, feels that a strong Prime Minister in control of his or her party, and correspondingly the government, has become a "desideratum for most voters". He says that Kejriwal, not Rahul Gandhi, is more likely to challenge Modi. "Rahul [Gandhi] was very much at the top of the Policy Influencer chain [during UPA regimes], yet was not seen

Sweeping success

The first real challenger in a long time to entrenched national parties, the AAP was founded by Arvind Kejriwal and associates in November 2012 as a breakaway from Anna Hazare's India Against Corruption movement. A timeline of how the common man's party has grown from strength to strength to arrive on the national stage as a serious contender:

Genesis

- Kejriwal was part of Hazare's anti-corruption movement in 2011 but felt the need for political involvement to achieve progress. He moved away in September 2012 to float a political outfit. The party was formally launched in Delhi on November 26, 2012.

What the party stands for

- A party that reportedly refuses to be guided by ideology, the AAP demonstrably stands for equality, development, accountability, and community building, and claims its core tenets are patriotism, honesty, and humanity.

Controversies

- Right from its early days, the AAP and Kejriwal have courted controversy, be it for sacking an MLA in 2014 or founding members in 2015, sending a businessman to the Rajya Sabha (2018) or for playing the soft Hindutva card to take on the BJP on various occasions.

The road ahead

- The AAP quickly figured out the key to survival and has found willing takers for its brand of politics in two States, but it continues to struggle to make progress in other States of interest. Unless it sheds reliance on a single tall leader and cultivates a truly national presence, its political future will likely remain restricted to a few pockets of influence.

> **We are not distributing freebies but laying the foundation of the country by providing free education and healthcare.**
>
> **ARVIND KEJRIWAL,** 2022

MAGZINE KING

SUDHAKARA JAIN

AT A CONVENTION of farmers that Arvind Kejriwal addressed, at the National College grounds in Bengaluru in April. The AAP is eyeing municipal corporations in several States.

as having accomplished much. This, plus his refusal to accept governmental responsibility during such periods has lowered expectations of his performance as head of government," Nalapat tells *Frontline*. According to him, if Arvind Kejriwal puts up a stellar performance in Punjab, his credentials as a leader who can be trusted will grow, "although not in time for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls".

REGIONAL PLANS

In 2023, the AAP plans to foray into newer regions with the halo of an incorruptible, consummate outsider. In Rajasthan, the AAP has announced it would contest all 200 Assembly seats; in Orissa, it is raising the pitch on the flood situation while promising free water and electricity and universal education and healthcare as blandishments.

The party is hopeful that Dalits, tribal people and the lower-income work force will gradually coalesce into its dependable support base. Its sudden exhortation of Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar, proponents of an egalitarian society, is aimed at precipitating that. The BJP realises that if the economy continues to flag and jobs remain elusive, the marginalised sections will move in a steady trickle to the AAP. Its wariness was betrayed when no less a person than Modi rushed to berate AAP's sop distribution as "*revdi* culture".

A recent online survey conducted by the Indian arm of the global market research firm YouGov, *Mint*, and the Delhi-based think tank Centre for Policy Research showed the AAP capturing public imagination more than before. Around 36 per cent respondents in 204 cities and towns said they identified with the BJP, down from 38 per cent in the previous round of the survey held in November-December 2021 while 7 per cent picked the AAP, against 1 per cent earlier.

The hounding of AAP leaders by the government's investigating agencies also gives away the BJP's unease. While Satyendra Jain, an AAP Minister, was arrested in a money-laundering case, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia is an accused in alleged irregularities in Delhi government's now-withdrawn new excise policy. But opinion is divided on whether these corruption charges can make a dent in the party's reputation.

POLITICAL STRATEGY

To effect his transition into a frontline political figure, fund-raising and a brush-up on international relations figure prominently in Kejriwal's agenda. He is eyeing municipal corporations in several States, which would help him build personal patronage networks and keep the cash flow coming. The AAP has genial relations with global think tanks, courtesy its social activism background, and Kejriwal plans to use them as an opening to secure international prominence. In August 2022, he was invited to participate in the World Cities Summit held in Singapore, but Delhi's Lieutenant Governor denied him permission to travel.

Modi's image of a global leader, as one who understands the great power dynamic and has the ability to harness it to India's advantage, distinguishes his brand of politics. As China continues to engage in provocations, political observers such as M.D. Nalapat believe Kejriwal's ineptness in geopolitics will be his stumbling block. "As yet, Arvind Kejriwal has not given any indication of his view on the ongoing Cold War 2.0 between the United States, its allies and partners and China. It is this that offers India both the biggest threat as well as the biggest opportunity. Each year, the awareness of the public on the effect of global geopolitics is growing. As a consequence, Prime Minister Modi, with his experience spanning over 2014-2022, is strengthening his position," Nalapat pointed out.

As the AAP's pros and cons get debated, critics say it has reneged on its promise to fix a flawed political system. "The AAP's structure is as undemocratic as that of any other political party and its leader autocratic. It is not inclined to take any position that might jeopardise the pro-majority sentiment," rued Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, author of *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times*, in a conversation with *Frontline*.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

THE CONVICTS IN THE Bilkis Bano case being welcomed after the remission of their sentence on August 15. The AAP is silent on this and such other issues.

The AAP's disadvantages are considerable. In several States such as Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, it failed to make a mark; its leaders were quickly absorbed by the BJP. There are signs of determination in the Congress not to cede any ground in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh, where elections are due in 2023. In Rajasthan, where it is in power, Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot announced the price of cooking gas cylinders at Rs.500, illustrating the Congress' plans to hijack the AAP's and the BJP's populism. If the Congress wins two or more of these States, the AAP's march will be scuppered. If Modi's popularity unexpectedly wanes before the 2024 general election, the Congress and regional parties with a superior organisational machinery will be better placed to take advantage of people‟s frustrations and snowball to power. The AAP's leaders say political battle lines will not be abruptly redrawn, but off-camera, they do not gloss over these prospects. □

Emphatic victories

The AAP has emerged as a serious contender in the political landscape with stunning victories in the Delhi and Punjab Assembly elections, accompanied by minor wins in Assembly and municipal elections in several States that have given it a foot in the door. Here's a look at the list of confidence-boosting electoral gains over the past 10 years:

Assembly elections

2013
Delhi: 28/70

2015
Delhi: 67/70

2017
Punjab: 20/117

2020
Delhi: 62/70

2022
Gujarat: 5/182 | **Punjab:** 92/117

Local body elections

2017
North Delhi: 21/104
South Delhi: 16/104
East Delhi: 12/64

2020
Delhi: 134/250

2021
Surat: 27/120
Chandigarh: 14/35

MINOR WINS

Assembly elections

2022
Goa: 2/40

Local body elections

2021
Gandhinagar: 1/44

2022
Guwahati: 1/60

2022
Singrauli (Madhya Pradesh) mayoral win

> **Today every citizen of Delhi has become Chief Minister.**
>
> **ARVIND KEJRIWAL,** 2015

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

SCENE FROM A MOHALLA SABHA of the AAP at Valmiki Basti in New Delhi in 2013.

The pragmatic party

Unlike other regional parties, the AAP continues to expand its base nationally, riding high on the general distrust of traditional parties, anti-incumbency factors and its promised relief for people from low-income groups. BY **ASHUTOSH SHARMA** AND **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

THE YEAR 2022 ENDED ON A PROMISING note for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which was formally launched on November 26, 2012. The decade-old party registered a mega win in Punjab, wrested the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) from the BJP, and made inroads into Gujarat, the home State of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

Emboldened, the party is now bracing for the upcoming State Assembly election in Delhi with an eye on the 2024 Lok Sabha election. On December 18, 2022, the AAP held its first National Council Meeting after attaining the status of a national party to discuss a pan India expansion plan. At the meeting held in New Delhi, AAP supremo and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal targeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi over national security and China's belligerence while calling for a new *swadeshi* movement and complete boycott of Chinese goods. To counter the BJP's "freebie" accusation against it, the party raised the issues of price rise and unemployment.

The past 10 years or so have seen the Congress shrinking and the BJP growing at the national level. In between, the AAP emerged from a 2011 civil society movement, India Against Corruption, led by social activist Anna Hazare. Currently, many political outfits, such as the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Janata Dal (United), the Telugu Desam Party, and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, are largely confined to their home

States. At the same time, parties such as the All India Trinamool Congress, the Nationalist Congress Party, and even the Bahujan Samaj Party run the risk of getting derecognised as national parties. But the AAP is in power in Delhi and Punjab and has been recognised as a State party in Goa and Gujarat. It does not have any Lok Sabha MP but boasts of 10 members in the Rajya Sabha.

"No other party has seen such a spectacular rise in a matter of 10 years," said Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann in a TV interview recently. In Punjab, the AAP won 92 of the 117 Assembly seats in the 2022 election. "Of 92 MLAs, as many as 82 are first-timers," Mann added, underscoring how political stalwarts such as the former State Congress chief, Navjot Singh Sidhu; former Chief Ministers Capt Amarinder Singh and Charanjit Singh Channi; Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) patriarch Parkash Singh Badal, his son Sukhbir Singh Badal, as well as the party's youth wing chief, Bikram Singh Majithia, lost to AAP candidates.

The AAP's political journey has seen some dramatic twists and turns, and it has proven astute political observers wrong on several occasions. Riding the anti-corruption wave, the AAP decimated the Congress in the 2013 Delhi Assembly election. Even after becoming the Delhi Chief Minister, Kejriwal remained an "anarchist" and his party never minced words while attacking the "corrupt and powerful". Of course, senior party leaders had to issue scores of unconditional public apologies in the following years.

Kejriwal said that his ragtag political start-up was a "Shiv *ji ki baraat*" (wedding procession of god Siva), where everyone irrespective of political beliefs was welcomed. The party projected itself as a political revolution, offering an alternative to mainstream political parties which had become "family fiefdoms or communal organisations".

IDEOLOGY-FREE MODEL

Over the years, the AAP, which survived on crowd-sourced funds initially, has seen a massive transformation in its character and functioning. Kejriwal's repeated assertions that his party follows the ideology of patriotism, honesty and humanity notwithstanding, the AAP is viewed as a party pursuing an ideology-free model of politics. In recent years, the party has largely restricted itself to municipal politics, focussing on issues such as electricity, water, school education and basic healthcare,

> The AAP's political journey has seen some dramatic twists and turns, and it has proven astute political observers wrong on several occasions.

A star is born

From anti-corruption activist to seasoned politician, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal has come a long way in more than two decades of public life.

Early days

- An IIT graduate who briefly worked with Tata Steel, he cleared the civil services exam and joined the Indian Revenue Service in 1995 as Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax and left after more than a decade in February 2006. Even while in service he started a movement to bring about change in society.

Life in activism

- Prior to entering the electoral arena, Kejriwal had a long stint as a social activist with a keen involvement in areas related to electricity and issues such as siphoning of public funds and transparency. He led several protests and rallies on issues such as power supply, land acquistion, water, and public education.

Shining moments

- Kejriwal's moment in the sun came with the India Against Corruption movement helmed by Anna Hazare. But it was the culmination of a decade in service that began with movements like Parivartan, founded by him, his campaign for the right to information, and the Public Cause Research Foundation. His work with Parivartan also won him the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2006.

Political rise

- Realising that taking the political plunge was inevitable, he floated the AAP in 2012 and met with considerable success in the very first outing. The second time around, AAP stormed to power in Delhi, trouncing every other party and the rest is history. Another stunning victory came in Punjab in 2022, with a massive mandate. All eyes are now on Kejriwal and the AAP to fell the incumbent Goliaths.

> **Who is an aam aadmi? Anyone who is tired of this corrupt system is aam aadmi.**
>
> **ARVIND KEJRIWAL,** 2014

आम आदमी मोहल्ला क्लीनिक
आम
CADD CENTRE CHHATTARPUR
'स्वास्थ्य ही जीवन है'
महात्मा गांधी
घर
रोग

SHANKER CHAKRAVARTY

A MOHALLA CLINIC in Mehrauli constituency, New Delhi. The Delhi government's welfare schemes such as free electricity, water and bus travel for women, and better healthcare at *mohalla* clinics have drawn voters to the AAP.

and projecting it as the "Delhi model". The pattern of promises during the Assembly elections in Goa, Punjab, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh was similar. Interestingly, according to the Association for Democratic Reforms, the party had the maximum number of candidates with criminal backgrounds in elections in 2022 .

BATTLE FOR MCD

The party's victory in the MCD election created ripples beyond the national capital. An elated Kejriwal described the win as the AAP's "fourth victory in Delhi". The BJP might not have won the Delhi Assembly election since 1998, but it did win all seven Lok Sabha seats from Delhi in 2019 and controlled the civic body for 15 years. For the campaign this time, the party roped in several Chief Ministers, Union Ministers, parliamentarians, and party workers from outside the State in an all-out effort for a fourth consecutive term. The strategy paid off only partially, with the party managing to increase its vote share to about 39 per cent from 37 in 2017 (when the MCD was divided into East, South and North corporations. In May 2022 the three were merged into one). The AAP picked up 134 of the 250 wards, while the BJP won 104.

While many, including BJP supporters, attribute the BJP's loss to the fact that its Lok Sabha MPs remained inaccessible to the common man, the fact is that the AAP mounted a strong and relentless campaign that targeted the BJP for failing to address civic issues. It successfully cemented the public perception that the MCD under the BJP had become a den of corruption.

Its campaign, "*Kude Pe Jansamvad*" (public discussion over garbage), across all the 13,682 booths, struck a chord with voters—Delhi's mounds of uncleared garbage were continuously highlighted. The AAP took a leaf out of the BJP playbook and announced that only the AAP's double engine presence in Delhi could redress these grievances. The public that was sick of the squabbling between the MCD and the Delhi government seemed to agree. "During my poll campaign, I just focussed on the cleanliness issue and convinced residents that only the

> Attacked by both Hindutva and anti-Hindutva camps in equal measure, the AAP, unlike the BJP and the Congress, is viewed as a party without an ideology.

AAP can make the area clean," said Priyanka Gautam, who won Ward Number 194 in Gharoli. The densely populated and unauthorised Mulla Colony and Rajbir Colony are part of this ward. The residents live under the shadow of the Ghazipur landfill site, a garbage mountain said to be as tall as the Qutb Minar.

The AAP had 10 catchy schemes in its arsenal, among them were the beautification of Delhi, a solution to parking problems, better equipped MCD schools, better hospitals, and clean zones for street vendors. The other shrewd move that yielded dividends was fielding women in 55 per cent of the seats. Besides, Bobby Kinnar (38), who won the civic election from Sultanpuri-A ward for the AAP, has become Delhi's first transgender councillor.

A majority of the over 50 per cent voter turnout, according to observers, was not from the affluent areas. This is directly connected to the Delhi government's welfare schemes such as free electricity, water, and bus travel for women and better healthcare at *mohalla* clinics, thus justifying the AAP's continued reliance on schemes that target its core voter base. A Lokniti CSDS MCD poll survey revealed that Delhi residents rated the AAP government positively, adding that those from low-income localities believe that power and water supply, water quality, and the condition of roads and drainage have improved under the AAP.

Equally important, the MCD election results showed that a considerable number of the AAP's Muslim voters have shifted loyalty to the Congress. Muslim-dominated wards such as Abul Fazal Enclave near Shaheen Bagh, which was at the heart of the Anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) protests, Mustafabad, Brijpuri, Shastri Park and Zakir Nagar voted Congress candidates to the civic body. Notably, these areas come under Assembly constituencies represented by AAP MLAs Amanatullah Khan, Haji Yunus, and Abdul Rehman.

This is clearly a fallout of the AAP's silence during the anti-CAA protests, the Delhi riots, and during the release of the accused in the Bilkis Bano case. Besides, the party's Dalit leader Rajendra Pal Gautam, who is the Minister for Water, Tourist, Culture, Arts & Languages and Gurudwara Elections, was allegedly forced to resign after attending a ceremony where 10,000 Hindus reportedly converted to Buddhism. The BJP kicked up a fuss just before the Gujarat election, and the AAP was clearly too scared of electoral loss. However, realising that it had offended the community, the AAP was quick to control the damage, appointing Gautam as a star campaigner during the MCD election.

AAP IN PUNJAB

In Punjab, the situation played out differently. Amid a deepening agrarian crisis, the political power had been oscillating between the SAD, SAD-BJP alliance, and the Congress. The AAP made its debut in the Lok Sabha after winning four seats in Punjab in the 2014 parliamentary election. Ahead of the election, the AAP did not have an organisational structure. "It would set up makeshift camps in towns and villages as part of its membership

Electoral misses

Although the AAP now enjoys national party status, its political journey has been one of a handful of hard-fought wins amid a plethora of electoral defeats. Here's a look at the numerous occasions when the mandate was overwhelmingly against it:

2019 Lok Sabha election

- The AAP contested over 40 seats across nine States and Union Territories and lost all but one.
- The party lost all seven seats in Delhi but recorded an 18.10 per cent vote share, its highest in the capital.
- The only victory came in Sangrur in Punjab, where Bhagwant Mann retained his seat.
- In 2022, Mann vacated Sangrur after becoming Chief Minister, but the party failed to retain it, losing to the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar).

Assembly elections

- The AAP has drawn a blank on several occasions but it never loses heart.

2017

Goa: 0/40
Gujarat: 0/182

2018

Chhattisgarh: 0/90
Karnataka: 0/224
Madhya Pradesh: 0/230
Meghalaya: 0/60
Nagaland: 0/60
Rajasthan: 0/200
Telangana: 0/119

2019

Haryana: 0/90
Jharkhand: 0/81
Maharashtra: 0/288
Odisha: 0/146

2022

Uttarakhand: 0/70
Uttar Pradesh: 0/403
Himachal Pradesh: 0/68

> **Entire country will be blessed if currency notes have images of Lord Ganesh, Goddess Lakshmi.**
>
> **ARVIND KEJRIWAL,** 2022

drive and that evoked tremendous response," Prof. Ronki Ram, who teaches political science at Panjab University, told *Frontline*. According to him, well before the party entered Punjab, many people from the State had already joined the India Against Corruption movement in Delhi. "People were disenchanted with the misgovernment of traditional parties like the SAD and the Congress. They were fed up with mafias running parallel administrations. The AAP offered hope," said Prof. Ram. "The ground was ready and the AAP didn't have to do much to capture it."

Many believe that the party would have won the 2017 State Assembly election as well. But it did not announce a chief ministerial candidate, triggering apprehensions that Arvind Kejriwal, a non-local, would become Chief Minister. In the run-up to 2022, it picked a Jat Sikh and Lok Sabha MP, Bhagwant Mann, as chief ministerial candidate and so mollified fears surrounding Punjabi identity. There was scepticism over issues such as Article 370, support for political prisoners like Devinder Pal Singh Bhullar, and Kejriwal's apology to SAD leader Bikram Singh Majithia for accusing him of being hand-in-glove with the drug mafia, but the AAP remained unfazed. It fielded political turncoats in almost 30 per cent of the constituencies. In order to shed its pro-Khalistani image, the party, in a departure from its strategy in 2017, did not involve the Punjabi and Sikh diaspora in the campaign. It ended up garnering votes from all castes and communities, according to the Lokniti CSDS post-election survey.

Analysing the AAP's victory in Punjab, Prof. Ashutosh Kumar, head of the Political Science department in Panjab University, told *Frontline*: "Sukhbir Badal had lost goodwill due to bad image, his father and party chief Parkash Singh Badal had become too old. They were accused of running the party and government like a family business besides patronising all kinds of mafias." Kumar added that the Sikh community was looking for an alternative, as it did not want to vote for the incumbent Congress. "It was not just that the Congress government performed poorly, but the way Amarinder Singh was dislodged also did not go down well with the Jat Sikh community. Punjab wasn't ready to accept Dalit Sikh Charanjit Singh Channi as Chief Minister. His image wasn't untainted either," he said.

Kumar credited the AAP's victory to candidate selection. "The party mostly gave opportunities to people who had a clean image and came from diverse professional and social backgrounds. They have been associated with the party for the past three-four years. There is this popular perception that Arvind Kejriwal can be anything, but he hasn't come to politics to mint money. The same thing is said about Bhagwant Mann."

Several AAP legislators in the Punjab Assembly are from humble backgrounds. For instance, Charanjit Singh Channi was defeated by the AAP's Labh Singh Ugoke, who used to run a mobile repair shop. Narinder Kaur Bharaj, who declared assets worth Rs. 24,000 in his nomination papers for the AAP, defeated Congress Cabinet Minister Vijay Inder Singla and BJP candidate and businessman Arvind Khanna, who had declared assets worth Rs. 9.62 crore and Rs. 22.77 crore respectively. Another AAP candidate, Jeevan Jyot Kaur, who defeated the Congress' Navjot Singh Sidhu and the SAD's Bikram Singh Majithia from Amritsar East, used to promote menstrual hygiene among rural women before she joined the AAP as a volunteer.

AAP IN GUJARAT

Five seats in the 182-seat Gujarat Assembly is by no means big, but it is certainly a significant victory for the AAP. Its vote share of 12.9 per cent helped it qualify as a national party. The win was important for one more very important reason: The BJP's Fortress Gujarat had been breached for the first time by a third player, a newcomer, who is here to stay.

"We have been successful in expanding our reach, particularly in the remote tribal areas. The Congress

WEL C ME स्वागत

DELHI CHIEF MINISTER Arvind Kejriwal (R) and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann flag off a Volvo bus service from Jalandhar to Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, in Jalandhar in June 2022.

PTI

literally gifted their seats away as they had no presence in this election," said Sagar Rabari, an AAP candidate who lost the election from Becharaji, Mehsana district.

Pre-election predictions suggested that the AAP would make an impression in Saurashtra and the tribal belt. It won four seats in Saurashtra and had a very comfortable victory in Dediyapada, which is in the tribal-dominated Narmada region. The AAP's candidate in Dediyapada, Chaitar Vasava, is from the Vasava tribal community. Vasava was part of the alliance between the Bharat Tribal Party (BTP) and the AAP but the two parties split in September 2022.

The BJP won 23 out of the 27 reserved constituencies. The Congress had won 15 in 2017. In 2022, it won three. Activists from the region believe that if the AAP adopts the strategy of sliding into the void left by the Congress, it may well have a future.

Tribal rights activist Anand Mazgaonkar said that there was a well-designed strategy behind the AAP's impact on the tribal belt: it first introduced itself as an urban party and made its mark in the Surat municipal election. Surat also has Adivasi areas, which became a part of the AAP's jurisdiction. Earlier in 2022, the Union Finance Minister's Budget speech had made a reference to the need to act fast on the river linking project. Adivasis, particularly in the southern Narmada region, went into ferment, Mazgoankar pointed out.

> Several AAP legislators in the Punjab Assembly are from humble backgrounds. For instance, Labh Singh Ugoke used to run a mobile repair shop.

Local Adivasi leaders began a massive mobilisation drive that attracted thousands. "The AAP latched on to this by identifying individuals such as Chhotu Vasava [Chhotubhai Amarasinhbhai Vasava] from the BTP. The tie-up with the BTP facilitated the AAP's entry into the region by lending it credibility. Then it made announce-

VIJAY SONEJI

A SCENE FROM AN AHMEDABAD STREET as an AAP road show led by Manish Sisodia, Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, passes by on February 6, 2021.

ments on forest rights and the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996," Mazgoankar said.

The According to *Lok Dhaba*, a website that analyses election figures, the AAP had a 17.8 per cent vote share in Saurashtra and 17.5 per cent in south Gujarat (tribal) as against 7.4 per cent in north Gujarat.

It replaced the BJP in Botad and Gariadhar and the Congress in Jamjodhpur and Visavadar. Rabari said that local politics and community dynamics were factors that made people vote for the AAP. The party had candidates from the dominant community in all the constituencies it won. "We thought we could fight on issues but in Gujarat, caste is too deep-rooted. In most constituencies, votes were divided on the basis of caste, not party. Our strategy had to be a combination of caste and issues at a micro level," Rabari said.

> The party has seen several high-profile desertions over the years amid allegations of the lack of inner-party democracy.

Amesh Vasava, a voter from Dediyapada, said, "The AAP said they would give free electricity, provide education and jobs. We gave our vote to Chaitar Vasava because we know him and he said the AAP will work for tribal people."

"They were never going to win, but they got a lot of traction. They caused a lot of damage to the Congress. Straight numbers will tell you they did eat into the Congress' vote share," said Mazgaonkar. The combined Congress and AAP vote share in 2022 is 40.2 per cent. In 2017, the Congress had a 41.44 per cent vote share.

The results showed that the accusation that the AAP was the BJP's "B team" had no basis, according to Aum Kotwal, a senior member of the AAP's Gujarat leadership. He said, "The Congress won in 2017 based on the Patidar agitation and caste issues. This time we came in second in almost 40 seats. I believe this indicates we are not an alternative to the Congress but to the ruling dispensation."

ADDRESSING IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

According to Manindra Thakur, an associate professor at the Centre for Political Studies, JNU, an "added advantage" for the AAP has been the shifting of the arena of politics from the factory floor or workplace to residential colonies. "The AAP doesn't do politics of trade unions or interest groups. It is involved in the politics of local issues or of residential areas. The AAP's transition from a mass movement to a party was difficult after it had promised not to get into politics. The party's initial strategy was to mobilise people who are honest and outside the political process. Kejriwal's strength is that he communicates very well. That communication strategy is based on the simple policy that everyone has a chance to become a leader in the AAP provided the control remains in his hands."

The party has seen several high-profile desertions over the years amid allegations of the lack of inner-party democracy. In Delhi itself, Kejriwal's most trusted lieutenants and the party's founding members such as Prashant Bhushan, Yogendra Yadav, Shazia Ilmi, Kumar Vishwas, Ashutosh, Alka Lamba and Kapil Mishra, besides several noted social workers, intellectuals, and civil society members, quit the party. In Punjab, two of its four Lok Sabha MPs, Dharamvir Gandhi and Harinder Singh Khalsa, left. Ahead of the 2022 Assembly election, at least 11 MLAs either quit the party or were disqualified.

Despite such internal challenges, the fledgling party has been going from strength to strength. "This idea that people who have a lot of goodwill in society will join electoral politics and people will vote for them doesn't work," said Thakur, citing how several famous social workers and well-known public intellectuals have lost elections, from Phanishwar Nath Renu to Medha Patkar to Irom Sharmila. "Politics is basically interest articulation. One has to assure people of what they will ultimately get out of politics. The AAP under the leadership of Kejriwal knows this art. The party promises water, electricity, healthcare and other things that the BJP calls "freebies", addressing the immediate concerns of people from the lower classes, who get attracted immediately," he said, adding, "The Delhi model has started working in other places as well."

Attacked by both Hindutva and anti-Hindutva camps in equal measure, the AAP, unlike the BJP and the Congress, is viewed as a party without an ideology. Its electoral success is attributed to the distrust of traditional parties, anti-incumbency factors and the party's promised relief for people from low-income groups. "The BJP does not have any method to counter the AAP. It can counter the Congress easily. The BJP's only strength is Hindutva, which Kejriwal neutralises quite skilfully," said Thakur, maintaining that "the AAP is quite pragmatic. It has no ideology other than winning elections."

Comparing the AAP and the BJP's election strategies, Thakur said: "The BJP's local leadership is drawn from the party and from the RSS. But the AAP has developed an interesting technique. It goes to a State, looks for average people with a clean image, and then brands them as leaders." Describing the AAP's capacity to build organisational structures in new territories on a war-footing, he said, "The moment the party is there, it immediately swings into action like a military that builds a floating bridge to cross the river." Thakur lauded the AAP for opening up a new space for aspiring political leaders without resources, who stood no chance to get entry into either the BJP or the Congress.

Unlike Delhi, where the Arvind Kejriwal-led government has locked horns with the Central government over the control of administrative services, the AAP coming to power in Punjab is being seen as the best thing to happen to Indian democracy in recent decades. The party has a full-fledged State in which it can build a model of good governance.

aap
हाउस टैक्स माफ
गंदगी साफ
आम आदमी पार्टी

R.V. MOORTHY

A RICKSHAW PULLER CAMPAIGNS for the AAP in the Shakurbasti area of New Delhi in 2017.

AAP'S PROSPECTS

"People have started trusting the AAP's election manifesto. There is a growing perception that the party is sincere about reviving government healthcare and school education systems. It cares for the poor and the marginalised. And in a way the AAP is empowering them. It has not declared itself as a party of a particular caste or community. If the party manages Punjab well, it can win over States like Gujarat," said Thakur. According to him, the AAP's prospects in national politics depend on how well it manages Punjab.

Punjab, however, is far more complex than Delhi, a small cosmopolitan city. The border State has a history of the Punjabi Suba movement and insurgency. It emerged as a model State after the historic green revolution of the 1960s.

Today, the State grapples with vexing issues like drug menace and farm distress. The economy is in a shambles, with a debt of Rs. 2.84 lakh crore, which the State government is planning to meet by taking an additional loan from the Reserve Bank of India. The AAP is yet to begin fulfilling most of its election promises. For Prof. Ram, the AAP's success in Punjab depends on two factors: the party's image—whether it remains unblemished; and the government's performance—whether it meets the expectations of the common people.

The AAP's prospect of growth in the national arena is riddled with dangers. As Thakur said, "Without an ideological compass, Kejriwal—who has a streak of authoritarianism in him—could take the AAP in any direction." ☐

Failing in Himachal, Haryana

TWITTER/AAP HIMACHAL PRADESH

DURING AN AAP ROADSHOW in Nalagarh constituency in Himachal Pradesh on November 9, 2022.

THE Aam Aadmi Party's failure to win even one seat in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly election seems to defy logic taking into account its recent performances in Delhi and Gujarat. Many of its candidates polled fewer votes than even NOTA (none of the above). The AAP had even roped in a former BJP MP to contest one of the seats; he came fourth. In Haryana, too, the party has struggled to make its presence felt as caste calculations have defied its development agenda.

In Himachal, the AAP started campaigning early on, much before the Congress or the BJP. The ground was prepared by Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain, the party's election-in-charge. According to observers, his arrest in a 2017 money laundering case put paid to the party's chances as it went on the defensive, trying to salvage its reputation.

Jain is an important leader and among AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal's close confidantes. Defending him became imperative as the issue was not only about Himachal anymore. The MCD election was in the pipeline, as was the Assembly election in Gujarat, where the AAP was projecting itself as an alternative.

Kejriwal had made grand announcements about forming the government in Gujarat, declared the Chief Ministerial candidate (who incidentally lost), and claimed on a television programme that the Congress would not get more than five seats. He had made similar claims about Uttarakhand and Goa too.

OVERCONFIDENCE

In Himachal Pradesh, the AAP was confident of winning some of the 67 seats it was contesting. Heady with the success in Punjab, Kejriwal began touring the State early on and Satyendar Jain was his lynchpin in the State.

A source said that Jain had made considerable headway in setting the mood. He held big rallies in Solan and Kangra. He also opened an office in Paonta Sahib in Sirmaur district.

Also, the AAP had no qualms about poaching members from other parties. However, it could not lure many from either the Congress or the BJP. Once he was arrested in June, the AAP's campaign virtually collapsed and the bandwagon moved to Gujarat. This helped the Congress in Himachal.

Also, the AAP's electoral promises had little impact as Himachal's development indices were far better than those of neighboring States.

The AAP had also not led any movements in the State when the BJP was in power. With Jain behind bars, everything came apart, sources said.

AAP's political stint in Haryana is puzzling. The party has not been able to mark its debut, despite Haryana's contiguity with the national capital in political, geographical, and, to an extent, cultural terms.

THE HARYANA PICTURE

With the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) in a state of apparent disarray, growing anti-incumbency against the BJP, and a fractional Congress, the ground appears ripe for a party like the AAP to step in. But its non-existent electoral presence in Haryana, which where Kejriwal actually hails from, is not easily explained.

Perhaps caste configurations in Haryana do not allow the AAP the space. The Congress led by Bhupinder Singh Hooda and the INLD led by Om Prakash Chautala claim to represent the Jats, while the BJP claims to represent the non-Jats, whose support the AAP competes for.

Yet, the AAP's showing in Hisar, Kejriwal's home district, has been dismal, even in local body elections. "No one takes him seriously," an observer said. Since 2014, it has not been able to make an impact in Assembly or Lok Sabha elections.

One of the consolation victories has been the chairman's post in one municipal committee, where the AAP secured 10 per cent of the vote. During the Kurukshetra district local body elections, it won five of 133 wards and the president's post in one ward. In panchayat elections held in November 2022, it won 15 zilla parishad seats in areas close to the Punjab border.

T.K. Rajalakshmi

Deafening silence

Muslims are in a dilemma over the AAP's inaction on crucial issues concerning the community and its "soft Hindutva" agenda. BY **ISMAT ARA**

MUSLIM VOTERS IN DELHI HAVE SUPPORTED the Aam Aadmi Party in the last two rounds of Assembly elections partly because they thought the party could beat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The AAP's policies on electricity, healthcare, and education were an additional attraction.

However, there have been rumours of disillusionment with the AAP's alleged "soft Hindutva" agenda as it attempts to expand its footprint across the country. The Aam Aadmi Party's identity has been tagged to the the politics of its founding member Arvind Kejriwal, who successfully made the transformation from an activist to a seasoned politician. In recent times, sections of voters have been compelled to rethink their decisions owing to his silence on Muslim-related issues. Muslims may not matter electorally to the AAP at the national level, but they make up a significant portion of the anti-BJP vote, which will be crucial in order to compete against the BJP.

SANDEEP SAXENA

AAM AADMI PARTY president Arvind Kejriwal addressing the "Roadmap for Muslims" Conference, in New Delhi, in 2014.

WHAT DO MCD RESULTS TELL?

The results of the recent elections to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) revealed that despite winning a majority of the seats, the AAP lost several seats to the Congress, particularly in areas where Muslims are in a majority.

The AAP's silence on the events in Shaheen Bagh (during the anti-CAA agitation) and the north-east Delhi riots in February 2020 appears to have cost it the Muslim vote. The party's stated position was that in the absence of control over the Delhi Police it could not control the violence in north-east Delhi. Abul Fazal Enclave and Zakir Nagar in Okhla, where the Shaheen Bagh protests were held, and the Muslim-dominated Mustafabad, Brijpuri, and Shastri Park voted Congress candidates to the MCD. All of them are situated close to the sites of the anti-CAA protests.

At least seven of the nine councillors elected on the Congress ticket were from Muslim-dominated areas. Ariba Khan (from Abul Fazal Enclave), one of the Congress councillors, claimed in her victory speech that Muslims had "seen through the development facade of the Kejriwal government". However, it must be said that AAP candidates also won from Muslim-dominated seats such as Ballimaran, Chandni Mahal, and Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. Even so, the community might drift away from the party if it does not stop sliding to the right.

But for the AAP, in order to win the support of the majority, it is important to jump on the Hindutva bandwagon. "The BJP has irrevocably changed everything," said Husain Naqvi, a 28-year-old junior resident doctor in Okhla. In the MCD elections, he voted for NOTA (None of the above). He explained, "I don't see anyone capable of working or speaking for the Muslim community in an objective manner and not denigrate us with their orthodox views."

Amanatullah Khan, an AAP MLA, was detained while staging a demonstration against the MCD's anti-encroachment drives Shaheen Bagh, Jahangirpuri, and other areas, but it is said that the AAP leadership did not even land up to show support.

Despite an AAP wave in Delhi, 22-year-old Maroof Khan joined the AIMIM (All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen) Delhi State unit in 2021. His reason: he believes that the AAP is working on the same agenda as the RSS. "They were silent on CAA/NRC, Delhi riots, Tablighi Jamaat, Ram temple, lynchings, Bilkis Bano, hijab controversy, and the brutal attack on Jamia [Jamia Millia Islamia University] students," he said, and added that areas such as Okhla are often left out when it comes to cleanliness, schools, and hospitals.

THE VOTE CUTTER

Afzal Alam (28), who works in a private real estate company, has been associated with the Congress for eight years. He said that the AAP has emerged as a "vote-cutter" of secular parties. He also believes that the RSS and the BJP support the AAP in order to disturb the Congress vote bank.

"AAP is like the BJP in the era of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani; they follow the 'soft Hindutva' model. Not a single tweet from Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on the Bilkis Bano rape case. Kejriwal's dual face was seen at the time of the anti-CAA movement. They even supported the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and the Uniform Civil Code," he said.

What really caused major disillusionment among many Muslims, according to Alam, was Kejriwal ordering an FIR against Maulana Saad, the Tablighi Jamaat leader, who was leading a congregation in West Nizamuddin during the pandemic.

> "The electoral success of the BJP has forced other parties to recognise Hindutva as the most acceptable narrative of politics," said Hilal Ahmed.

However, many Muslims still continue to support the AAP. Haji Naseem (58), a social worker based in Delhi's Sunder Nagri ward, said he voted for the AAP candidate because she was the only one who could defeat the BJP candidate. "The statements given by the Chief Minister over the Tablighi Jamaat issue were wrong.... I am sure that he will get the message from these elections; that Muslims are unhappy with the party," he said.

Kaleem Siddiqui (40), a social activist based in Ahmedabad, voted for the AAP in the Gujarat Assembly election. He said: "The AAP contests elections on citizens' issues and is not as harmful as the BJP. In an AAP-ruled State, there is a possibility of communication and bargaining with the government, which is not the case with the BJP."

But he too agreed that Kejriwal's silence on Shaheen Bagh and the FIR against Maulana Saad disillusioned a section of Muslims. It was speculated that the AAP would get a major chunk of the Muslim votes in Gujarat, but observers said it lost that chance due to its stand on the UCC and silence over the Bilkis Bano case.

BENIGN DISINTEREST

Zafarul Islam Khan, former chairperson of the Delhi Minorities Commission (DMC), author and journalist, told *Frontline* that the DMC had published several reports during his tenure, but the AAP government took no notice of them. There were reports on the socio-economic and educational status of the survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the socio-economic and educational status of Muslim women in north-east Delhi, and the problems and status of Muslim graveyards and Christian cemeteries.

Khan said, "My experience with the Kejriwal government, as Chairman of the DMC during 2017-20, was not good, to put it mildly. They did not support any schemes and they did not hinder them either. It was a case of benign disinterest.... The Kejriwal government neither placed any of our three annual reports in the Assembly nor accepted or rejected any of our recommendations." According to him, repeated requests to fill the vacant posts for Urdu teachers went unheard. "Our request to pass a Muslim marriage law, on the lines of the Sharda Act [relating to child marriage] passed by the Kejriwal government for the Sikh community, was not even acknowledged."

"Kejriwal's schemes for Hindus to visit religious places, indifference during the CAA/NRC protests as well as during the Delhi riots of 2020, call to print Hindu deities' photos on Indian currency notes, and now the party's role as a vote-cutter for the benefit of the BJP has increased the belief of Muslims that AAP is not the alternative to BJP they thought it was," Khan told *Frontline*. According to him, Muslim voters will not have a united approach. "Muslim voters have learnt to vote for the best non-BJP candidate," he said.

ACCEPTABLE NARRATIVE

Hilal Ahmed, associate professor at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, who writes regularly on the nature of Muslim political discourse, said that the electoral success of the BJP has forced other parties to recognise Hindutva as the most acceptable narrative of politics. "Since the AAP officially recognises itself as a 'party without an ideology', it is easy for it to adjust to the available templates of politics. This helps the party get involved in Hindu appeasement without giving up its Muslim support," he told *Frontline*.

He added: "I don't think the term 'soft Hindutva' is appropriate to describe the nature of politics of the non-BJP parties. Every political party is now taking Hindutva as a political reference to define its position on crucial issues. So, it's not about 'soft' or 'hard Hindutva'. AAP is doing it well because unlike other parties, it doesn't have the baggage of the secularism-communalism binary. As a political party it was born exactly at the time when secularism was being replaced by Hindutva as the dominant narrative." ☐

ARVIND KEJRIWAL offering prayers at the Hanuman Mandir in New Delhi on the eve of the Delhi Assembly election in February 2020.

COVER STORY

PTI

On the ascendant

After Gujarat, the Aam Aadmi Party seems confident to present a more forthright national narrative as the main challenger to the BJP, although it has deliberately kept the ideological contours of this challenge open to interpretation. BY **ASIM ALI**

"NOW IT WILL BE NARENDRA MODI VERSUS Arvind Kejriwal in 2024," the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Sanjay Singh declared as he celebrated the party's impressive performance in Gujarat in early December. This has been a good year for the AAP—bookended by the whirlwind triumph of Punjab and establishing a foothold in Gujarat—culminating in its official recognition as a new national party. After Gujarat, the party has exuded a growing confidence to modify its low-key State-by-State strategy (adopted following the disaster of the 2019 Lok Sabha election) and present a more forthright national narrative as the main political challenger to the BJP.

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

CELEBRATING victory in the MCD election in December.

A peculiar feature of this emerging national narrative, gauged from the AAP's discourse both during and after the Gujarat election, is the emphasis on the ability of the AAP to electorally challenge the BJP without spelling out the nature of the underlying political challenge it poses to the BJP.

VAGUE IDEOLOGICAL POSITION

In contrast to the Congress, which has clearly constructed its national narrative on the three planks publicised in the course of the Bharat Jodo Yatra (political centralisation, economic disparity, social/communal conflict), the AAP deliberately keeps the contours of its political challenge to the BJP ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The oft-repeated theory behind the vague ideological positioning of AAP is that it allows the party to forge an umbrella coalition across ideological divides; melding, for example, both pro-BJP and anti-BJP voters under a governance platform. Yet, in practice, the AAP has repeatedly failed (outside of Delhi) to court disaffected BJP voters.

Even as the State BJP governments laboured under substantial anti-incumbency pressures in Uttarakhand, Goa, and Gujarat (particularly on the issue of corruption), the "crusaders against corruption" hardly made a dent in the BJP's support base. Himachal Pradesh, an upper-caste-dominated State with hard nationalistic moorings (which Modi swept with a 69 per cent vote in the post-Balakot upsurge) might have provided a testing ground for the political usefulness of AAP's ideological positioning.

Yet, the AAP never generated significant traction and later ceded the opposition ground to the Congress, which eventually ended up winning the State. Further, the 13 per cent vote that the party garnered in Gujarat was overwhelmingly comprised of previous Congress voters: Adivasis, Dalits, Kolis, and Muslims.

Delhi, too, provides only a limited endorsement of the theory of AAP's attractiveness among BJP-leaning voters. In a paper analysing the 2020 Delhi elections, Ankita Barthwal and I had demonstrated three related points: one, the median voter of Delhi (across caste groupings) held rightward leanings on the three key issues raised by the BJP during the campaign (CAA, Article 370, and the Ram Mandir); two, the AAP support base was much more ideologically dispersed than the Congress; and three, the AAP's "soft Hindutva" (taking neutral or even conciliatory stances on questions of Hindu nationalism) might have possibly helped the AAP hold on to right-leaning voters amidst a polarising campaign, by allowing the party to foreground its populist welfare schemes as the most politically salient factor of the electoral contest.

Yet, as stated earlier, even Delhi does not provide any decisive evidence of the AAP's superior ability at making inroads into the BJP's turf, as compared to the Congress. The BJP's support base has stayed remarkably stable over the last two decades, hovering between 35-40 per cent of the electorate. The BJP's vote share in the recent election to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (39.09 per cent) was almost identical to what it had gathered during the last Assembly election (38.51 per cent). Moreover, the saffron party's vote share was much the same before the rise of the AAP. In the three elections the BJP unsuccessfully fought against the Sheila Dixit-led Congress, the BJP garnered 34, 35, and 36 per cent of the votes.

It is true that the centre of gravity of the BJP's support base might have undergone a few subterranean shifts—for instance, in the last two elections, some losses among the Punjabi migrants from West Delhi have been made up by the influx of Purvanchali voters of East Delhi. Yet, the larger story of Delhi's political landscape is the implosion of the Congress (and to some extent the BSP), and the takeover of that space by the AAP. The same right-leaning voters, after all, had also previously backed Sheila Dixit, under a governance platform catering to middle-class concerns of infrastructure development and urban gentrification.

Moreover, the consecutive blanks that AAP drew in both 2014 and 2019 general elections in Delhi (slipping below the Congress in the latter), when pro-Hindutva voters flocked to the BJP and anti-BJP voters (such as minorities) returned to the Congress fold, indicates that the AAP's coalition is glued more by a contingently constructed transactional utility rather than an imaginatively moulded ideological consensus.

In practice, AAP's "soft Hindutva" increasingly serves two political functions, independent of any ideological overtures towards BJP voters. First, shrill proclamations of Hindu religious devotion allow the AAP a relatively low-cost route to easy media coverage. In many ways, the rise of the AAP is a 24x7 TV news phenomenon (note the central role of TV anchors in the making of the Anna movement to the rolling coverage afforded to Kejriwal's anti-establishment theatrics). The AAP of today has since shed much of its anti-establishment fervour in favour of a populist governance platform, marketing a few marquee welfare schemes to construct a welfarist, pro-development brand in the mould of a regional party such as the BJD, the AIADMK, or the JDU, the only difference being the supposed scalability of its model.

In Gujarat, for example, the party shied away from clearly articulating an opposition to crony capitalism in the manner it had done in an earlier phase in Delhi, burning electricity bills to protest the alleged collusion of Congress with corporates such as Reliance in inflating electricity prices. The AAP now presents corruption more as government dishonesty/inefficiency rather than a systemic feature of the political economy, which probably also helps the party garner a more favourable coverage in the media.

Since the AAP still needs media oxygen to drive its political campaign (partly an outcome of the perennial negligence afforded to the task of building a rudimentary organisation), the party has zeroed in on Hindutva symbolism to generate the theatrical visuals and talking points earlier provided by its disruptive protest politics.

> An overdose of Hindutva risks diluting AAP's core brand appeal and also tarnishing the brand of Arvind Kejriwal.

Second, and paradoxically, AAP's soft Hindutva platform appears to have as much to do with burnishing the party's "winnability quotient" among anti-BJP voters as it is meant as an exercise to win over pro-BJP voters. The stridently religious slogans of "Jai Shri Ram" in Gujarat are also partly a message to anti-BJP voters disillusioned with the Congress' ability to dislodge the BJP that the AAP possesses a winning formula that can break through political divides and overturn BJP hegemony. Of course, the fact that the AAP won much of its support from traditionally Congress-voting Dalits and tribals, who had heretofore remained cold to Hindutva appeals, owed largely to its well-marketed Delhi model of welfare delivery. But it also stemmed from the hope that the AAP, unlike the Congress, had the ability to forge a winning coalition, and Hindutva symbolism had also been employed as a marker of credibility in that regard.

The central question hovering over opposition politics over the next two years will be whether the Congress is able to hold on to its space as the primary national challenger in the face of an ascendant AAP that is now primarily pursuing a strategy of encroaching on the space of a declining Congress.

CAN AAP REPLACE THE CONGRESS?

Much will depend on the State elections in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. On the face of it, the dynamics of these States are loaded towards a rerun of the bipolar Congress-BJP contest like Himachal Pradesh rather than a triangular fight like Gujarat. Unlike in Gujarat, the Congress in these States is a very credible claimant for power, and possesses the State-level faces to mobilise its core support base.

The political narrative and populist energy harnessed by the Bharat Jodo Yatra further reinforces the Congress' claim as the principal opponent of the BJP in the next general election, as opposed to the AAP which has largely shunned national issues and joint opposition platforms over the last three years. Yet, if there is one party which recent history cautions us from underestimating, it is the AAP.

In an article on the AAP that I had written last year, when it was still a single-State party, I had argued that it is within the realm of possibility that the AAP can replace the Congress as the second pole of Indian politics by the end of this decade. As a parallel, I had presented the case of Israel, where a rightward shift in public opinion had precipitated the destruction of the Labour Party, the left-wing party that built modern Israel, and the appropriation of that space by a string of centrist and centre-right parties, more in tune with the nationalist zeitgeist.

But that parallel also holds a cautionary tale for the AAP. The centrist parties which have entrenched themselves in Israel (such as Yesh Atid) have fulfilled two criteria: one, they have resolutely focussed on the economy and standard-of-living issues, treating contentious ideological issues as peripheral to their agenda; and two, they have spawned charismatic leaders who have held on to a reservoir of trust among the electorate. The centrist parties which have imploded (such as Kadima and the Center Party) are the ones who obsessed on fashioning a new ideological middle ground on questions of security and religion.

An overdose of Hindutva, geared towards cleverly fomenting just the right proportion of Hindutva nationalism and welfare, carries the risk of diluting not just AAP's core brand appeal but also tarnishing the brand of Arvind Kejriwal, who already battles perceptions of being an unprincipled political opportunist. Defensive Hindu religious symbolism (as a covering shield from "anti-Hindu" attacks from the BJP), for better or worse, has been accepted as a fact of political life by most opposition parties in the country. But it must be remembered that Hindutva (or Hindu majoritarianism) has only one time-tested, authentic face in the country, and that 100-year-old school is not open for new admissions. □

Asim Ali is a political researcher and columnist based in Delhi.

'Our agenda is clear: hospitals and schools'

Interview with Sandeep Pathak, national general secretary (organisation) of the AAP. BY **ISMAT ARA**

SANDEEP PATHAK, A SENIOR POLITICIAN and Rajya Sabha member, was selected as the national general secretary (organisation) of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on December 13. The decision came on the heels of the AAP making inroads in BJP-dominated Gujarat, where it won five seats in the Assembly election with a vote share of nearly 13 per cent, thus earning the status of a national party.

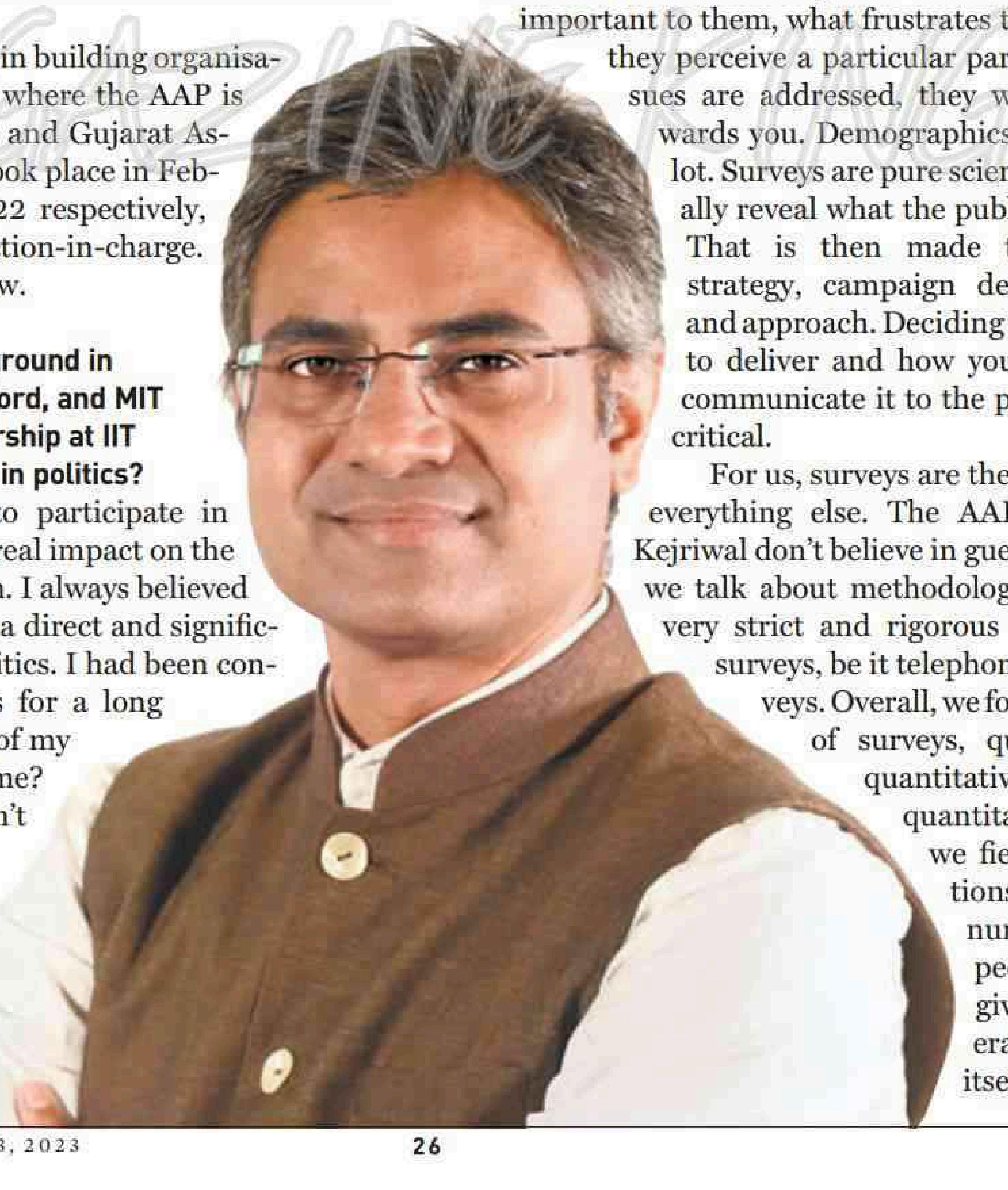
Pathak is a former assistant professor of IIT Delhi, and former research associate at University of Oxford and MIT. He joined the AAP in 2016 after he left MIT and returned to Delhi.

Pathak's expertise lies in building organisational structures in areas where the AAP is weak. During the Punjab and Gujarat Assembly elections, which took place in February and December 2022 respectively, Pathak was the AAP's election-in-charge. Excerpts from an interview.

With an educational background in science at Cambridge, Oxford, and MIT and an assistant professorship at IIT Delhi, how did you end up in politics?

I've always wanted to participate in policymaking and have a real impact on the development of the nation. I always believed that the only way to have a direct and significant impact is through politics. I had been considering entering politics for a long time but I wasn't certain of my strategy. Who'd take me? They would argue, you don't have a political background. The anti-corruption movement was thriving in New Delhi while I was away. I thought that Arvind Kejriwal and the AAP sounded sensible.

I made the decision to join them and it has been a successful partnership.



SANDEEP PATHAK: "We fight elections with the same agenda everywhere, no matter the competing party."

You stress the importance of "rigorous" surveys. What is your methodology and how does it help the AAP?

Politics is very competitive. A political party must first understand what the public wants, what issues are important to them, what frustrates them, and how they perceive a particular party. If those issues are addressed, they will incline towards you. Demographics also matter a lot. Surveys are pure science. They actually reveal what the public is thinking. That is then made the basis for strategy, campaign design, slogans, and approach. Deciding what you want to deliver and how you are going to communicate it to the people are very critical.

For us, surveys are the foundation of everything else. The AAP and Arvind Kejriwal don't believe in guesswork. When we talk about methodology, we mean a very strict and rigorous way of doing surveys, be it telephonic or field surveys. Overall, we follow two kinds of surveys, qualitative and quantitative. In the quantitative survey, we field brief questions from a large number of people. That gives us a general sense, but by itself, it cannot help much. The qualitative surveys, the in-depth interviews with different segments of people, help in designing strategies.

You have been involved in Punjab since 2017. What factors led to the AAP's landslide win in the Punjab Assembly election in 2022?

There are actually several parameters, I can pinpoint a few. One is the organisation. In AAP, we reinvigorated the entire organisation in Punjab. This led to a certain optimism among workers, giving them a sense of hope. The first thing was to convince them that we can form the government. Then, we had to find the appropriate candidates and a CM face. For any healthy organisation, the key is to find the right person for the right job. We did that scientifically. We mapped every candidate based on their profile.

Once the organisation was set, it all depended on how far we could penetrate. We penetrated into all the villages. Communication was sharp.

The second thing was the campaign. You have to run campaigns on the basis of issues of the people. When you start giving people what they really want, it works. India is heterogenous and the perceptions of people change from one *mohalla* to another. Only surveys can help. The design of our campaign was based on these surveys and reflected what the public wanted.

Running the campaign effectively is also important. Most political parties want to have big campaigns, whereas we believe in micro-campaigns. Also, we try to design the best campaigns with minimum resources. We hold small meetings like *Jansanvad*, which involves a two-way communication with people. This helped us in Punjab, it turned things around for us. In an unprecedented way, we managed to hold *Jansanvads* in each and every village. We had local leaders, who would speak to the people on the basis of the surveys we had done. Campaign execution was also micro-managed.

Then you have the leadership. The Chief Minister candidate, Bhagwant Mann *ji*, is a very able leader. He has a clean image and is also a great orator. He is liked by all across the State, which helped us. The selection of the candidates was purely on merit.

Why did the AAP strategy fail in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly election?

We have to accept that we lost. We shouldn't feel that we can win every election. We can only try hard. In Himachal Pradesh, the timing was tough. Initially, Satyendar Jain *ji* entered the fray but his arrest derailed him. Their primary intention was to derail him.

We had Assembly elections in Gujarat and Himachal, and election to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). With whatever resources we had, we tried. I believe that if we go full horse, full power, Himachal would also vote for us. Until and unless you accept your weaknesses and analyse your strengths, you would never grow.

There are upcoming elections in Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. In which of these States will the AAP contest?

The situation is such that in every State, people are interested in new politics. They are actually willing to allow AAP enter the fray. We have now acquired the stature of a national party. We are liked throughout India. So, now, we have to build our organisation across the country. Coming back to elections, wherever the opportunity arises and if things fit into our strategy, we will fight elections.

In Gujarat, the AAP managed to make the elections a three-way contest but could not manage more than five seats. What worked in your favour and what didn't?

The Gujarat result is quite encouraging. Initially, when I was given charge, most of the pundits and friends in the media called to ask why I had taken up this role. They told me that it amounted to destroying my career since there is no space for a third party in Gujarat. But we wanted to fight, even if the election was difficult.

We have proved our detractors wrong. Now the AAP has some 40 lakh votes in Gujarat, around 13 per cent of the vote share, and five seats, making it the third political party in the State. When we ran the campaign and the Delhi Chief Minister started visiting Gujarat, the support from the people was overwhelming. The kind of love and affection that people showed made all the political pundits and journalists sit up and take notice.

At one point, everyone started thinking that the fight is between the AAP and the BJP. Closer to the election, the Prime Minister was forced to camp in Gujarat, signalling that anything could happen. Then came the results. From zero, we got five seats.

The BJP as an organisation is very strong in Gujarat. They have sister organisations working for them and the Congress didn't even fight the elections. It was as if they had surrendered. So, for a party like us, in a State like Gujarat, the result was encouraging. Our surveys in Gujarat showed that people wanted an alternative. They were not happy with the BJP and the Congress was not fighting with full gusto. There was a space for us.

Our entire campaign was based on the needs of the public: *bijli*, *paani*, *mehengayi*, hospitals (electricity, water, rising prices, healthcare). We would go to the people and say that we would focus on these. To our advantage, our governments in Delhi and Punjab have worked enough on these matters. It was easy for us to convince people that we can do this. They trusted us.

The AAP has maintained a strategic silence on several minority issues such as the release of Bilkis Bano's rapists from jail, the Tablighi Jamaat controversy, and the Delhi riots. A minister was also made to resign for participating in a Buddhist mass conversion event. Are all these being done to win over the BJP's voters?

You run campaigns on the basis of people's issues. We don't deviate from our main target of schools, hospitals, water, electricity, and good governance. Our target and

> We are a nationalist party which would never compromise on anything of national interest. We believe that honest politics is directly related to good governance.

ideology are very simple. We are a nationalist party which would never compromise on anything of national interest. We believe that honest politics is directly related to good governance. When you build schools or hospitals, Hindus and Muslims both would go there. The BJP tries to distract people with such issues. Our agenda is very clear: hospitals and schools.

Numbers from Gujarat, Delhi Assembly, and MCD elections tell us that the AAP is emerging as an alternative to the Congress. But can the AAP reduce the BJP's vote share at the national level, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi is directly on the ballot?

In the MCD elections in Delhi, we were directly against the BJP and we defeated it. We also went to Gujarat to challenge the BJP. Congress did not exist for us. No matter what the results, we had thrown a challenge to the BJP. Sometimes the number of seats in electoral outcomes may not reflect this immediately, but five years down the line, the scenario will change. In Gujarat, wait for another five years. The Gujarat project is a work in progress. I will take it to its logical conclusion. We will continue to challenge the BJP there.

We fight elections with the same agenda everywhere, no matter the competing party. There are two types of politics, constructive and negative. When we do constructive politics, we involve educated people and talk about real issues of the people and contribute to the nation's development. In negative politics, the only focus is on winning elections, which is what the BJP does. This fight is between constructive and negative politics.

When I was in England, I witnessed the smooth functioning of governance, hospitals, and transport. I wondered why it is not the same in India. It is their politics that makes them different. It is constructive politics. There should not be politics on issues of schools and hospitals. In fact, irrespective of which political party comes in, these things should be the priority.

How do you respond to allegations that the AAP is the BJP in a softer shade of saffron?

We are fighting elections against the BJP. This is the real test which tells us whether we are friends of the BJP or against it. Today, only Arvind Kejriwal is in a place to challenge the BJP. Look at Gujarat. Not the results, but the intensity with which we fought the elections. We are not their softer version, rather we are hard on issues that matter.

What are the AAP's plans for south India?

As a national party, we should ideally expand everywhere. But the public decides ultimately. The kind of politics we do is important everywhere, be it North or South. Our spread to the South will be calculated and the public response will be primary.

What is the party's approach towards succession? Is a second rung of leaders being trained or is Kejriwal the only face?

As of now, we have clarity in terms of leadership. We have Kejriwal. For the future, we have many second-rung leaders such as Manish Sisodia, Gopal Rai, and Sanjay Singh. The second rung of leaders is being developed organically. Look at me, I was in the background till now. Now I have a position. Similarly, the party has many hardworking people, but they work silently.

In Delhi and Punjab, the focus on education and health found acceptance. Will the model work in other States?

I feel that education and health will find traction in all States. These issues are of utmost importance to people across India. All other issues are intertwined with them. We have got 40 lakh votes in Gujarat in such a short time. Why? Because of schools and hospitals. When we managed to make these issues important in a State like Gujarat, we can do it in other States too.

Has the AAP's anti-corruption image taken a beating since the case against Satyendar Jain and other AAP leaders?

I was abroad for 10 years. I could have become a professor in any country. I left it all to come back to India. And after I joined, I realised how honest and transparent the party is. If we believed in corrupt practices, we would not have been suffering from a crunch of resources, because of which we are not able to focus on multiple States at the same time. This is the biggest testimony to our honest politics.

Now that Kejriwal has emerged as a big leader, they want to attack the people who work with him because if they directly attack him, it will backfire. Their strategy is to bring down the AAP and Kejriwal. They are trying to target several AAP leaders. But ultimately, it will not matter. We will keep doing our duty. The people will understand.

As the AAP's first general secretary, what is your vision for the party?

My vision is simple. I believe in constructive politics. I want to take this idea of constructive politics and the Kejriwal model to every village and every city in this country. I want to build a strong organisation and prepare the party for future battles. ☐

GUEST COLUMN

PUBLIC POLICY

SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

The prohibition debate

In December 2021, the Chief Justice of India referred to the Bihar prohibition law as a perfect instance of legislation devoid of foresight. Since last February, the Supreme Court has been hearing a petition calling for the law to be declared unconstitutional.

EVERY law is enacted on a prior assumption that the capacity to ensure its purposes can be created. Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar owns the State's prohibition policy but seems bereft of the capacity to enforce it.

Nitish Kumar's sense of absolute moral conviction did not waver as the toll mounted from the recent illicit alcohol tragedy in Saran and Siwan districts. Nobody would be compensated for the loss of life, he insisted, as restive members of the State legislature demanded accountability. "We have been making such an appeal for a long time," he said, "that if you consume liquor, you will die."

There is a certain cynicism there, a peevishness that the people of Bihar are failing in a moral obligation to comply with his intentions. In his absolute moral certitude, Nitish Kumar seemed to overlook that there can be no recompense for the dead, and the living are blameless.

Enacted in 2016, Bihar's prohibition law criminalises a whole chain of activities: "no person shall manufacture, bottle, distribute, transport, collect, store, possess, purchase, sell or consume any intoxicant or liquor". Consumption comes last in the chain and is enabled only by all prior acts. It could be argued that the willingness of the consumer to hold up his link provides the incentive for the entire illicit chain. But that causal connection is not obvious: demand could create supply, but the converse too could be true.

Prohibition is not the sole factor causing deaths and disability due to illicit alcohol. Over a fifth of the deaths from alcohol poisoning in recent years have occurred in three States—Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh—where there are no legal impediments to the manufacture or distribution of spirits. Here the consumer who opts for an illicit rather than a licensed source of supply may perhaps be aware of the risks involved in his quest for an altered state of consciousness. In States where prohibition is in force—Gujarat being another example, where a horrific tragedy occurred as recently as July—the seeker has no option but to tap a hazardous source.

SCALE OF CULPABILITY

An individual's susceptibility for altered states of consciousness is no criminal act. And the Bihar law recognises this grudgingly, by specifying a graduated scale of culpability along the chain of activities. A person or entity engaged in the manufacture or transportation of alcohol within State borders, without clear licence, would be liable for a fine of Rs.1 lakh and a minimum term of five years in prison. That punishment would escalate rapidly to Rs.10 lakh and life imprisonment for repeat offenders or very egregious violators.

The offence of consumption, with its lesser impact on society at large, would attract a fine of Rs.50,000 or a three-month term in prison for first-time offenders. For creating a "public nuisance" or permitting a home or other ownership premise to be used for drunken revelry, a person could attract a minimum imprisonment of five years, perhaps alongside a fine of Rs.1 lakh.

In tacit acknowledgment of the tardy procedures of the law, the Bihar law includes a unique provision that overrides notions of fairness in the confiscation of property and wealth. District Magistrates or Collectors, if convinced that death or injury has happened on account of alcohol, could order the person held responsible to pay Rs.4 lakh to the legal heirs of each of the deceased, or Rs.2 lakh to the person who has suffered serious harm. Relief could be granted by an appeal in the High Court, but only after at least half the ordained amount is paid out.

Scholars have struggled long years to reconcile between two conceptions of law: what it is and what it ought to be. Laws exist to be obeyed, and a lack of compliance invites the sanction of empowered authorities. A utilitarian view of law suggests that it is what it is, and never quite achieves the status of what it ought to be. It gains its authority from a habit of obedience that a "public" develops to the commands of a person or institution which is not itself under similar obligation.

In a view derived in some measure from theories of the social contract, law gains the compliance of the "public" only to the degree that it represents a general perception of what the ends of justice ought to be. Liberalism permits a range of human behaviours and the individual in society is entitled to the widest latitude so long as he does not bring "harm" to himself or others.

THRESHOLD OF SOCIAL HARM

All the freedoms granted by Article 19 of the Constitution (often called the rights to freedom clause) are limited at the threshold of social harm. The right to pursue a livelihood and engage in any manner of commerce is unfettered, except where it could be of harm to others.

After the arrogance of his early response, Nitish Kumar seemed to be stressing this rationale when he argued at a later stage that prohibition had been a resounding success. "Family bliss has returned and people are happier spending money on food and lifestyle," he claimed.

There is little question that women, often at the receiving end of alcohol-induced abuse, are a powerful constituency backing prohibition. In the 1990s, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh introduced prohibition in response to powerful grassroots movements, but sheer impracticality ensured that both efforts were abandoned in quick time.

When exempted by law from liability, the minimum expectation that could be placed on official agencies is one of administrative capacity. Yet the story that has unfolded in Bihar is one of mounting incapacities. In December 2021, the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, referred to the Bihar prohibition law as a perfect instance of legislation devoid of foresight. Since last February, the Supreme Court has been hearing a petition calling for the law to be declared unconstitutional. Figures furnished by the Bihar State counsel in March reveal four lakh cases registered under prohibition law and 3.5 lakh arrests effected.

> Haryana and Andhra Pradesh introduced prohibition in the 1990s, but it was abandoned due to impracticality.

Though no figures are available for the specific offence connected with each arrest, it is fair to assume that the majority pertain to consumption or being found in a state of drunkenness. Recognising that this least egregious of offences was causing an alarming spiral of unheard cases, an amendment was introduced to the law in July, empowering executive magistrates in various jurisdictions to summarily deal with this lower order of crime. Though a powerful temptation, summary justice is never known to promote compliance with the law.

CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE

There is a constitutional mandate for prohibition in Article 47, part of the Directive Principles. As with the directive to secure a ban on cow slaughter, the Constituent Assembly here strove to disguise its moral intent behind a scientific façade. The promotion of scientific agriculture and animal husbandry were the ostensible rationale behind the place the cow enjoyed in the Constitution. Likewise, wider objectives of nutrition and public health were portrayed as the ultimate object of prohibition.

As initially drafted, the prohibition clause in the Constitution had few nuances: it just blandly asserted that the policy would be a check against moral dissipation. There was one member, B.H. Khardekar from Kolhapur, who spoke up against the presumption that alcohol was the surest road to ruin. His intervention in the debate on November 24, 1948, was prescient in pointing out the many potential abuses: from promoting corruption to illicit sales. He drew attention to the disastrous experience of the US with prohibition, and while bowing in reverence towards Gandhi, insisted that the father of the nation would have preferred leaving decisions of personal choice to the individual conscience.

Many failed attempts later, it is time to recognise that good sense and conscience are all that hold up administrative rectitude. Curtailing basic liberties on a presumption that individuals have a natural tendency to abuse them is self-defeating policy. Rather than engage in the fragmented calculus of gains and losses, public policy needs to be governed by a notion of overall gains in welfare. For governments to recognise adult responsibility among the governed is, without question, a net gain for social welfare. □

Sukumar Muralidharan teaches in the School of Journalism, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat. Views are personal.

POLITICS

Wooing Vokkaligas

In Karnataka, the Vokkaliga community, which is the main vote base of the JD(S), may not be averse to seeking other options, and the BJP is pulling out all the stops to get them to its side in time for 2023.

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi at the unveiling of the 108-feet-tall bronze statue of Nadaprabhu Kempegowda, called 'Statue of Prosperity', in Bengaluru, on November 11.

PTI

VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED

CHIKKAMOGE GOWDA of Ajjahalli village in Maddur taluk of Mandya district is a supporter of the BJP. He said: "While the party will make gains, there is a lack of local leadership groomed within the party."

IN THE FRACTIOUS CASTE-based politics of Karnataka, the historic rivalry between Lingayats and Vokkaligas has dictated the trajectory of politics, with both dominant castes having a disproportionately high political representation relative to their population. Informal estimates put the populations of Lingayats and Vokkaligas at around 14-16 per cent and 10-11 per cent, respectively, of Karnataka's total population, but MLAs belonging to these two castes won roughly half the seats (out of 224) in the 2018 Assembly election in the State.

While Lingayats are influential in north and central Karnataka, Vokkaligas, a peasant caste, are dominant in 11 districts in south Karnataka with an emphatic political presence in Hassan, Mandya, Ramanagara, and Bengaluru Rural districts. Even though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has managed to establish a strong base across Karnataka over the past three decades, it is perceived to be a Lingayat-backed party and the Vokkaliga-dominated parts of south Karnataka or "Old Mysore" (as this region is also known because it is contiguous with the former borders of the princely state of Mysore) have, largely, remained impervious to its influence. The region, apart from its urban pockets where the BJP has a considerable base, has traditionally elected MLAs from the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)].

In the BJP's calculations, it must make inroads in this region in the run up to the Assembly election slated for April/May 2023 in order to win a simple majority. Since 2004, with the exception of the Congress in 2013, no party has won a simple majority in Assembly elections in Karnataka.

> The core of Tipu Sultan's kingdom overlapped the areas that have a high concentration of Vokkaligas now.

SUGARCANE BELT

Sugarcane is the major agricultural crop in south Karnataka. Irrigated by the Cauvery river, swathes of sugarcane fields dominate the landscape. *Frontline* spoke to N.L. Krishna, 51, a sugarcane farmer based in Nagarakere village of Maddur taluk in Mandya district, who was on his way to his fields. "Members of the Vokkaliga community are not loyal to one political party and vote intelligently based on who has the potential to become Chief Minister," he said. "There will be an improvement in the vote share of the BJP here because of gestures such as the installation of Kempegowda's statue and the organised way in which the party's cadre is going about its work, but it will not be able to win any seats," he added.

Busloads of Vokkaligas from Nagarakere and other villages in Maddur taluk were ferried to the Kempegowda International Airport on the outskirts of Bengaluru on November 11 for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unveiling of the 108-foot-tall bronze statue of Kempegowda. The highly publicised event was the BJP's most aggressive attempt yet at reaching out to the Vokkaligas; Kempegowda, a vassal of the Vijayanagara Empire in the 16th century and credited with founding Bengaluru, is considered an icon for the Vokkaligas. The unveiling was preceded by the party's concerted campaign to collect *"mrittika"* ("holy soil") from 22,000 locations across the State.

Of the seven MLAs in Mandya district, six are Vokkaligas; the seventh is a reserved seat. All seven MLAs who won in 2018 belonged to the JD(S) of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, which is now led by his son and former Chief Minister, H.D. Kumaraswamy. One of these seven MLAs, K.C. Narayana Gowda representing K.R. Pet, switched to the BJP in 2019 and managed to retain his seat in the subsequent byelection, the saffron party's first win in the Vokkaliga bastion.

While Krishna was not optimistic about the BJP's chances at increasing its tally in south Karnataka, Chikkamoge Gowda, 41, who runs a chicken shop in neighbouring Ajjihalli village was more sanguine. Gowda is an enthusiastic supporter of the BJP and the reasons he gave were that the "BJP works for the nation, for the country's security, and Hindu dharma". But he also acknowledged that while the party would make gains, "there is a lack of local leadership groomed within the party, which is the main problem for the BJP. Most of the BJP leaders here have come from the Congress and the JD(S)."

A crowd that had gathered around Gowda took potshots at him, asking him what the BJP has done for Vokkaligas or sugarcane farmers. An exasperated Gowda said, "This is the problem of Vokkaligas; they can never think beyond their caste. If all Hindus become one, then there would have never been invaders like the Mughals and the British."

But N.S. Jagadeesh Nagarakere, 42, a Vokkaliga sugarcane farmer, was confident that the BJP's attempt at communalising the Vokkaligas would not work. "The BJP's attempts to use emotive issues such as the hijab, halal, and Tipu Sultan will not work here as Muslims are an intrinsic part of our village society. Traditionally, Muslims are blacksmiths and we rely on them to shoe our cattle's hooves," he said.

THE TIPU FACTOR

The reign of 18th century Mysore ruler Tipu Sultan has become contentious in Karnataka as members of the BJP have accused him of being a religious bigot.

Tipu Sultan became a political talking point after former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah of the Congress launched an annual celebration in 2015 to mark the birthday of the ruler who died fighting the British in 1799. The core of Tipu's kingdom overlapped the areas that have a high concentration of Vokkaligas now.

VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED

N.S. JAGADEESH Nagarakere and N.L. Krishna, both sugarcane farmers from Nagarakere village in Maddur taluk, Mandya district.

A recent Kannada play, written by a playwright sympathetic to the BJP, portrayed two Vokkaliga soldiers as having killed the Muslim ruler. This is widely seen as an effort by the BJP to spread the ideology of Hindutva among Vokkaligas.

Hindu right-wing organisations have also attempted to storm the Jama Masjid built during Tipu's reign in his capital Srirangapatna (also in Mandya district), claiming that the mosque was built on the site of a temple.

Political analysts such as Muzaffar Assadi of the University of Mysore said that the BJP's attempts at communalising the Vokkaligas would only have limited impact. "The latest attempt by the BJP is to create two mythical Vokkaliga characters called Uri Gowda and Nanje Gowda in a play as the persons who killed Tipu Sultan for the protection of Hindu dharma. They have also tried to create an aura for BJP as the party that gave prominence to Kempegowda. All this will have an impact only on a small section of Vokkaligas who I describe as 'pant Vokkaligas' (urban educated sections) and not on the 'chaddi Vokkaligas' (rural agriculturists). Rural Vokkaligas are more bothered about agricultural issues and for most of them, Deve Gowda is the patriarch of the community. Prominent Vokkaliga leaders of the BJP such as R. Ashoka, C.N. Ashwath Narayan, and Dr. K. Sudhakar (all three are Ministers; Sudhakar moved to the BJP from the Congress in 2019) are pant Vokkaligas and they don't have a large following among the rural Vokkaligas," Assadi said.

A senior Mysuru-based Vokkaliga journalist with a leading Kannada newspaper spoke to *Frontline* on condition of anonymity: "There is no chance that the BJP will increase its seats in Old Mysore. If we look beyond the urban seats in south Karnataka, they have only three seats in the Vokkaliga-dominated rural belt and they will lose all three in 2023. Even the JD(S) is looking weak and in this scenario if the Congress declares D.K. Shivakumar (Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee president) as its chief ministerial candidate, the Vokkaligas will rally behind the Congress."

There are mixed signals from within the party about who will be the chief ministerial candidate, with supporters of both Shivakumar and Siddaramaiah declaring their leader as the next Chief Minister.

A. Narayana, a political commentator associated with Azim Premji University, agreed that the "JD(S) is at its weakest point in its history". He said it was "difficult to say whether JD(S) voters will go back to the Congress or be lured by the BJP". The BJP's byelection victory in K.R. Pet in Mandya district in December 2019 amounted to a breaching of the JD(S)'s Vokkaliga fortress and was a huge morale booster for the party.

The JD(S), a Vokkaliga party that revolves around the halo of Deve Gowda and Kumaraswamy, had been written off in the past but surprised observers by coming back strongly to play the role of kingmaker or even become the "king" (Kumaraswamy had two truncated terms as Chief Minister, allying with the BJP and the Congress, respectively). It has retained a vote share of 18 to 20 per cent over the past five elections. Soon after Modi unveiled Kempegowda's statue, Kumaraswamy made a combative comment: "They [the BJP] believe that installing a statue will help them gain the votes of Vokkaligas. They are under an illusion." ☐

Ideology plus

The BJP's Pasmanda gamble, in addition to the Hindutva push, will pose a challenge to Bihar's Grand Alliance, even though it is unlikely that economic largesse alone will win it the community's vote.

BY **ANANDO BHAKTO**

PTI

A PASMANDA Sammelan in Uttar Pradesh's Rampur on November 12.

IN BIHAR, THE CLOCK HAS turned back to 2015 for the Bharatiya Janata Party, when a Grand Alliance of the Janata Dal (United), the Rashtriya Janata Dal, and the Congress relegated it to the margins in the Assembly election, highlighting Hindutva's limitation in opposing a broad social coalition of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Muslims. In hindsight, the BJP would be better off concentrating on widening its voter base to include the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) and Dalits, including backward Muslims or Pasmandas.

At the party's Hyderabad national executive meet in July 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the importance of reaching out to deprived sections of all communities. The BJP's interest in Pasmanda Muslims is demonstrated by a series of actions that followed. It fielded four candidates from the community in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections and organised back-to-back Pasmanda meets in Lucknow, Bareilly, Rampur, and Kanpur in October and November. Following this, RSS leader Ram Madhav and several Muslim leaders, including Ghulam Gous, Sabir Ali, and Akhtari Begum, held a discussion in Patna on November 26 on uplifting the Muslim poor. "About 75 per cent of Muslims are Pasmanda, but they are not getting adequate representation. This section needs to raise their voice," Ram Madhav said in the meet.

OUTREACH TO MUSLIMS

The opposition contends that the BJP's outreach to Muslims comes at a time when targeting and vilification of the community are at an all-time high. Jitan Ram Manjhi, former Bihar Chief Minister whose Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) is part of the Grand Alliance, called the BJP's advances a "complete charade". But questions that arise in this context are: Were the BJP's victories in Rampur and Azamgarh Lok Sabha byelections in Uttar Pradesh and Gopalganj Assembly byelection in Bihar, constituencies with a salient Muslim population, an aberration? Or, are there fractions within the Muslim vote where the BJP sees an opening for itself?

To understand these questions, it is important to examine the trajectory of Muslim politics in India and the political context that triggered the migration of the Muslim vote from the Congress to socialist parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the RJD, and thereafter from the RJD to Nitish Kumar's JD(U) in 2005. For the first four decades after Independence, the overlying concern of Muslim ideologues and politicians, who were invariably upper class Muslims or Ashrafs, was the protection of the community's religious and cultural interests, broadly the continuation of Muslim personal law and the preservation of Urdu.

DISENCHANTED WITH THE CONGRESS

As the Hindu Right jousted with the Muslim intelligentsia over these bargains, the concept of the homogeneity of the Muslim vote emerged, deflecting attention from the more pressing issue of socio-economic upliftment of the minorities. When Mandal-*kamandal* politics swept India in the late 1980s, Muslims, riled by the opening of the Babri Masjid locks, defected from the Congress to Lalu Prasad in Bihar and Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh (both leaders were then in the Janata Dal).

However, the Muslim disenchantment with the Congress was more deep-rooted. In its pristine form, Article 41 of the Constitution, which envisages reservation for the Scheduled Castes, did not have a religious restriction. In 1950, a presidential order made the provision exclusive to Hindus; amendments in 1956 and 1990 included Sikhs and Buddhists, respectively, but Muslims and Christian Dalits remained out of its purview. A section of Muslims blames the Congress for this.

SANDEEP SAXENA

THE BJP organised back-to-back Pasmanda meets in Lucknow, Bareilly, Rampur, and Kanpur in October and November. Here, at a meeting organised by the party's minority wing in Lucknow on October 16.

When the V.P. Singh government announced reservation for the OBCs in 1990, backward Muslims, who were among the beneficiaries, started formally organising themselves, with the themes of their politics shifting to development and equity. In Bihar, two important bodies were set up reflecting this newfound consciousness as opposed to the hitherto reactionary politics of the upper-class Ashraf Muslims: Ajaz Ali's All India Backward Muslim Morcha in 1994, and Anwar Ali's Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz in 1998.

The year 2005 marked a turning point in Bihar. As the State remained under President's Rule, the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz and the Bihar Momin Welfare Society organised a convention in Patna to bat for reservation for Dalit Muslims. Both Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar attended it. Whereas Lalu Prasad remained non-committal, Nitish Kumar endorsed the move and raised it in Parliament. This compounded the sentiment among backward Muslims that the RJD's attitude towards them was more or less similar to that of the Congress, wherein the Ashrafs and now also the Ansaris, an OBC caste, got patronage, but Muslim masses lived in poverty.

With slogans such as "*Jo pasmanda ki baat karega, wahi Bihar pe raj karega*" [whoever recognised the Pasmanda demand will rule Bihar], the JD(U)-BJP stormed to power in the November 2005 election. Compared with the elections held in February that year, the JD(U) tally increased from 55 to 88 seats in the 243-member Assembly; the RJD plummeted from 75 to 54.

LONG-STANDING DEMAND

The current OBC focus of Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, and Nitish Kumar appears to have made Muslim Dalits uneasy, and their long-standing demand for inclusion in the SC list has become the mainstay of their political discourse. "It will be naive to think that the fear of the communal forces will be the only metric deciding our votes. In the 30 years of RJD- and JD(U)-led regimes, the downtrodden castes such as the Kunjra, Qureshi, and Raeeen got nothing," said Wasi Akhtar, a social worker based in Patna.

Akhtar, who is a member of Edar-e-Shariya, a madrassa for the poor, said that several Dalit Muslim groups had proposed a summit to discuss the vexed question: "Why [vote for] only Lalu Yadav?" It was scheduled to take place at the Islamia auditorium in Patna in November but was postponed to February 2023. According to a CSDS-Lokniti survey, 8 per cent of the Muslim

‘We are the party of OBCs, Dalits, and tribals’

Interview with Shahnawaz Hussain, BJP leader and former Union Minister. BY **ANANDO BHAKTO**

SHAHNAWAZ HUSSAIN of the BJP has held key positions in the erstwhile Nitish Kumar-led National Democratic Alliance government in Bihar. Now out of power, his party faces the daunting task of countering the Other Backward Classes (OBC) consolidation that the Janata Dal (United) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal are aiming for in the next election. In this interview, the former Union Minister discusses his party’s plans to navigate Bihar’s electoral maze and the motive behind its focus on backward Muslims. Excerpts:

At the BJP’s national executive meet in Hyderabad in July, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed the importance of focussing on the deprived sections of all communities. What are your party’s initiatives in this regard?

This is not the first time he has said so. Even as Chief Minister of Gujarat, his focus was on the poor and the downtrodden as he comes from a poor background and can relate to them. The BJP has always given leadership roles to people from OBCs, Dalits, and tribals. The Mandal Commission’s recommendations also included backward Muslims as beneficiaries of reservation, because except for the Sheikhs, Sayyads, and Pathans, all others in the Muslim community are backwards.

What will be the BJP’s strategy in Bihar for the 2024 Lok Sabha election? The 2015 Assembly election showed that the BJP can face a rout if the RJD, the JD(U), and the Congress are together.

R. V. MOORTHY

When a team performs well unexpectedly, that match is much talked about. But the BJP has outperformed them [Grand Alliance] in several other political matches in Bihar. Even in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, which we fought without Nitish Kumar, we won 32 of 40 seats. Narendra Modi comes from the backward Teli community, which is listed as OBC in Bihar; the people of Bihar consider him as their own. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the NDA [with Nitish Kumar] won 39 of 40 seats; in the 2020 Assembly election, the BJP’s strike rate was the best as OBCs and EBCs [Extremely Backward Classes] supported us wholeheartedly. EBCs and OBCs were angry with Nitish Kumar, though the latter has been attributing his poll debacle to the Lok Janshakti Party’s role as a vote-cutter, which is not true.

The JD(U) can keep circulating narratives about Nitish Kumar emerging as the opposition’s consensus candidate [for the 2024 election]. But, then, is Rahul Gandhi walking thousands of kilometres to facilitate Nitish Kumar’s elevation?

The JD(U)-RJD is talking about a caste census. We respectfully agreed to that. But then, they want to fight elections over caste; we want to fight elections to accord respect and power to [backward] castes.

When it comes to caste census, the BJP’s stand is contradictory. It supported it in Bihar as Nitish Kumar’s erstwhile ally, but its Central leadership and other State units opposed it. With your political opponents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh making a caste-based census the fulcrum of their politics, how do you plan to counter it?

When the T20 format of cricket started, teams like Pakistan and Sri Lanka performed very well initially, but later India gave a fitting reprisal. We are champions of the OBC-centric political field that the Grand Alliance is aiming to recreate. It is the BJP that gave the country an OBC Prime Minister. We are not the supposedly Brahmin-Baniya party of the 1990s; we are the party of OBCs, Dalits, and tribals. We are a party that works for every block of society. The West Indies have won so many World Cups, but now they do not even qualify for the semifinals. They [JD(U)-RJD-SP] are the West Indies of OBC politics, having run out of steam.

The BJP fielded four Pasmanda Muslims in the MCD elections. There are reports that the party may field up to 1,200 Pasmanda candidates in the UP municipal elections. On November 26, a party meeting in Patna focussed on Pasmanda Muslims. How has the community reacted to the BJP’s outreach?

The minority community wants participation in politics, but they were not associated with our party in great numbers. Our endeavour is to reach out, just as we reached out to backward classes and Dalits. The word Pasmanda means left out; they are enlisted as OBC reservation beneficiaries, but some of them want enlistment in the Scheduled Castes list. We will connect more widely with them [backward Muslims]. We have given the ticket to Pasmanda Muslims in earlier MCD elections also.

At least a dozen castes within the Pasmanda Muslims have been struggling for inclusion in the SC category. What is the government's stance on this?

There are [Muslim] castes that are Dalits by occupation but are enlisted as OBCs, such as butchers, and they have been demanding inclusion in the SC list. In Jammu and Kashmir, we have worked to emancipate the Gujjar community and enlisted them as ST [Scheduled Tribe], but in this case there are constitutional restrictions. But we are committed to ensuring Pasmanda Muslims' political participation. In Jammu and Kashmir, we nominated Gulam Ali Khatana, a tribal, to the Rajya Sabha. In Uttar Pradesh, we are focussing on building leaders from large backward Muslim communities such as Ansari, Qureshi, and Raieen.

Some of the worst crimes such as lynching have been directed against Pasmanda Muslims/marginalised Muslims. Will you be issuing some directives to your party cadres/larger Sangh Parivar cadre to this end?

As far as the Sangh Parivar is concerned, they treat all citizens equally; their focus is to ensure everyone becomes a dutiful citizen. As far as Muslims are concerned, whatever atrocities have been reported, say, on the Qureshis who are butchers, it did not happen because they were Muslims... those who perpetrated these crimes were not from our party. If the victims of most of the atrocities were from the Pasmanda community, it is not because of their religion, but because of circumstances, such as suspicion over cattle trade, etc.

voters backed the BJP in the 2022 UP Assembly election and 14 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

There is little doubt that Lalu Prasad is still popular among the poor. "Who can forget Lalu's role in dousing the communal fire in Bihar during the rath yatra [by L.K. Advani in 1990]. Nitish Kumar also maintained communal harmony," said Mohammad Iqbal, a 60-something cart-puller from Patna's Dargah Karbala locality.

But the younger lot is exasperated. Heena Khatun, a domestic help belonging to the impoverished Sai community, said: "I enrolled my three children at the Government Middle School in Dargah, Sultanganj. They are entitled to meal/ration, but aren't getting any." She attributed the deprivation of people like her to the "complacence of secular parties".

WHO IS A PASMANDA?

The debate over who is a Pasmanda adds to the disillusionment. The Urdu-Persian word pasmanda roughly translates into "left behind" or "oppressed". Politicians use it as an umbrella term to refer to 75 to 85 per cent of the non-Ashraf Muslims. Dalit Muslims, who constitute 47 per cent of the community, are alarmed by this generalisation. The Sachar Committee report had classified Muslims into three categories: Ashrafs (forwards), Ajlafs (OBCs), and Arzals (Dalits). Both Ajlafs and Arzals are beneficiaries of OBC reservation, but Dalit Muslims are pressing for inclusion in the SC list.

Ghulam Sarwar Azad, a national executive member of the All India Tanzim-e-Insaf, told *Frontline* that the need for SC reservation arose because Dalit Muslims were unable to compete with dominant castes in the OBC quota. "The purpose will be defeated if Ajlafs and Arzals continue to be treated interchangeably," he said. According to him, Pasmanda is "a misleading terminology" invented to deflect focus from Dalit Muslims. Halalkhor, Bakkho, Sai, Chik, Rajaka, Qureshi, Bhatiara, Pamaria, Bhanghi, and Dafali are some of the impoverished Dalit castes.

> The Urdu-Persian word pasmanda roughly translates into "left behind" or "oppressed".

As the BJP's Pasmanda march continues, former parliamentarian Anwar Ali points out that Pasmanda Muslims were the victims of some of the horrific crimes which took place under the watch of the Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh. "The BJP espouses a Manuvadi ideology that is structurally opposed to equality and brotherhood," he said. He admits that the BJP's social welfare sops, particularly ration for the poor, attracted a section of Muslims to its fold. "They are *lobharthi* [avaricious], not *labharthi* [beneficiary]," he said scornfully.

But it is unfair to turn elections into a stark ideological choice, feel the less well-heeled. Mohammad Asif, a teacher belonging to the Chik caste, expressed his displeasure: "Everyone expects us to defend secularism, but can secularists explain why Tejashwi Yadav is yet to disburse the promised 10 lakh government jobs?"

It is possible that the BJP sees in these dissensions an entry point. General discussions with the Muslim electorate also underlined the point that with the larger Sangh Parivar cadre intensifying its focus on cow vigilantism and with anti-minority hate crimes on the rise, an impact on the livelihood of some castes such as the Qureshis (butchers) may prompt them to assimilate with the BJP in order to avoid further targeting.

Yet, most people that *Frontline* spoke to said that it was unlikely that mere economic largesse can secure a sizable Pasmanda vote for the BJP. However, Rampur is testimony to the fact that the party needs only a nibble of the Muslim vote to best its opponents. Nobody is willing to bet that this will not happen. □

CONTROVERSY

PRO-KANNADA PROTESTERS in Hire Bagewadi in Belagavi on December 6.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Language barriers

The resurgence of linguistic politics in Karnataka and Maharashtra presents the opposition in both States a chance to use it against their respective governments. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

LIVE ISSUES

The inter-State disputes arising out of demarcation of boundaries and claims and counterclaims are as follows:

1

Andhra Pradesh-Odisha

The seven-decade-old border dispute is over administrative control of the Kotia gram panchayat, or Kotia group of villages, which consists of 21 revenue villages in Koraput district. Both States are busy flooding the area with welfare schemes.

ON DECEMBER 14, UNION Home Minister Amit Shah met Chief Ministers Basavaraj Bommai and Eknath Shinde in Delhi amid the escalating border row between Karnataka and Maharashtra. Addressing mediapersons after the meeting, Shah, flanked by the duo, sent out a strong message that the border dispute had to be resolved "through constitutional means" and that, till the "Supreme Court gives its verdict, no State will claim or generate demand for any territory as its own". Shah also stated that a committee led by an Indian Police Service officer would monitor the security situation along the border and that three Ministers from each State would meet and discuss ways in which this message could be conveyed to the people in the two States.

The ongoing fracas between Karnataka and Maharashtra is over the status of Marathi and Kannada-speaking towns and villages along the border. The complex nature of the dispute, which has legal implications for the federal structure of the country, and the fervour of linguistic chauvinists on both sides mean that the issue will continue to simmer and may explode into violence at any time as previous incidents over the decades have shown. The latest bout of wrangling began in November following reports that the Supreme Court was considering a fresh hearing on a 2004 petition filed by Maharashtra. (The hearing by a three-judge bench, which was to happen on November 23, did not take place.)

Bommai took to Twitter to state that "there was no question of giving up any space in the border districts of Karnataka" and demanded the merger of Kannada-speaking areas in Maharashtra in Solapur and Sangli districts. Senior Maharashtra politicians such as Sharad Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party responded by saying that Karnataka give up the regions of "Belgaum", Nippani (both in Belagavi district of Karnataka), and Karwar (headquarters of Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka) to Maharashtra. (The Karnataka government had changed the name of Belgaum district and its headquarters bearing the same name to "Belagavi" in 2014 to reflect its pronunciation in Kannada, but Maharashtra politicians continue to refer to it as "Belgaum" emphasising the Marathi pronunciation).

More serious were the instances of violence and vandalism in the border areas by members of linguistic groups. A Belagavi college student was beaten up by his college mates for waving the Karnataka flag. In December, pro-Kannada groups blocked the highway connecting Belagavi to Maharashtra and Goa, while Maharashtra Ministers were prevented from entering Belagavi. Public transport vehicles from both States that regularly cross the border were vandalised. Seen in isolation, these events seem shockingly flagrant, but for long-time observers of this inter-State border dispute, this was not new.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

MARATHI ACTIVISTS vandalise a KSRTC bus in Dhound village in Maharashtra on November 25.

COMPLICATED ISSUE

The origins of this controversy can be traced to 1956, when colonial-era provinces across India were reorganised on linguistic lines after the passage of the States Reorganisation Act. The modern State of Karnataka (which was known as Mysore till 1973) was formed in 1956 by combining Kannada-speaking regions of the erstwhile colonial provinces of Bombay and Madras, the princely state of Hyderabad, and the Chief Commissionerate of Coorg with the princely state of Mysore.

Following the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission, 865 villages spread across 10 taluks bordering modern Maharashtra and the city of Belgaum (now Belagavi) became part of the newly formed Kannada State of Mysore. Marathi speakers in the region re-

---

2

Haryana-Himachal Pradesh

The dispute is over a large chunk of land bordering Himachal Pradesh in Parwanoo. It is next to Panchkula district of Haryana.

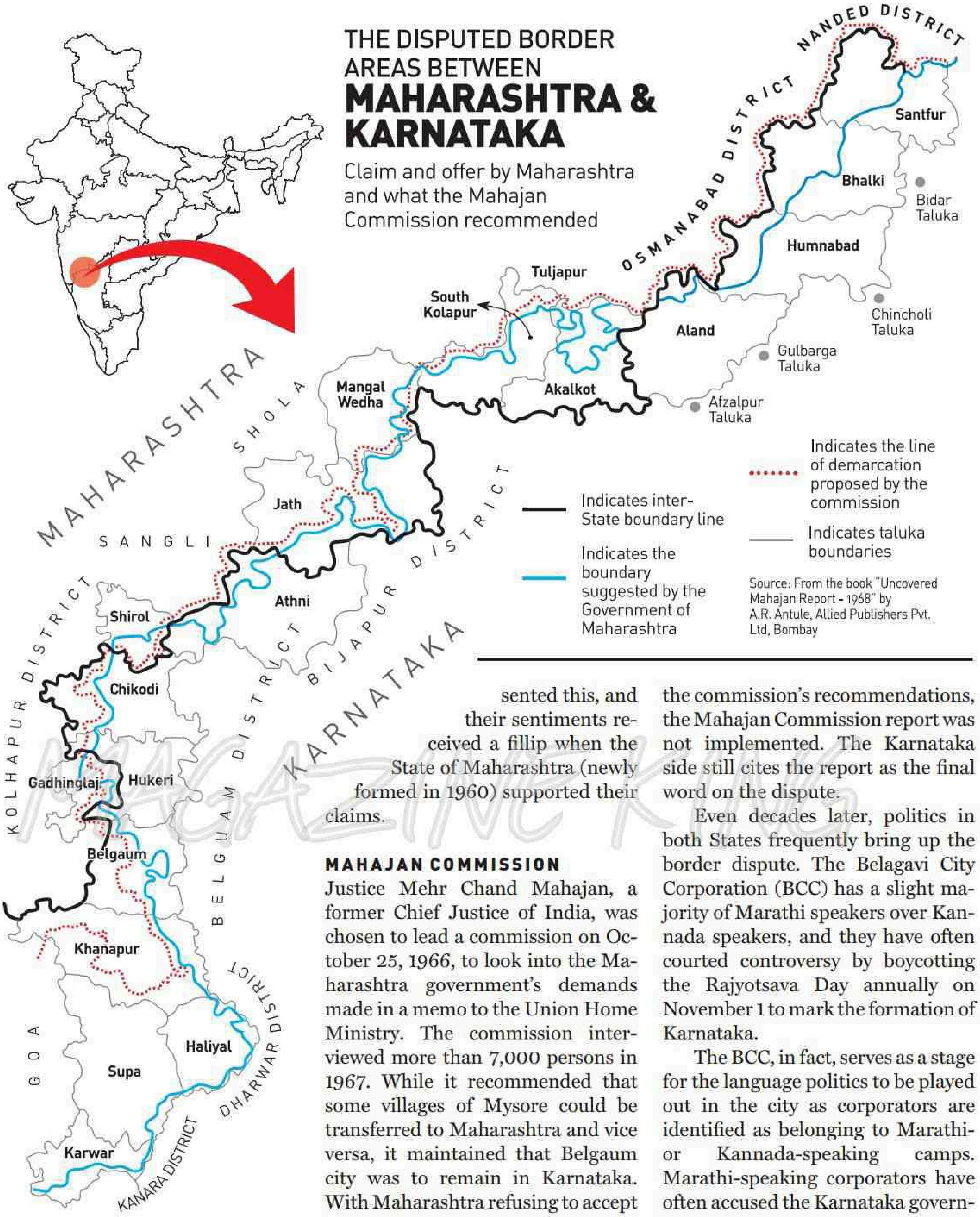
3

Union Territory of Ladakh-Himachal Pradesh

Ladakh has staked its claim to Sarchu and Sumdoh using pre-Independence revenue records. Sarchu, 13 km inside Himachal, is on the Manali-Leh highway in Lahaul-Spiti district. Himachal also claims that local shepherds have grazing rights in Shinkula on the border.

THE DISPUTED BORDER AREAS BETWEEN MAHARASHTRA & KARNATAKA

Claim and offer by Maharashtra and what the Mahajan Commission recommended


MAHARASHTRA
SANGLI
SHOLA
NANDED DISTRICT
OSMANABAD DISTRICT
Santfur
Bhalki
Bidar Taluka
Humnabad
Tuljapur
South Kolapur
Aland
Chincholi Taluka
Gulbarga Taluka
Mangal Wedha
Akalkot
Afzalpur Taluka
Jath
Athni
Shirol
Chikodi
Gadhinglaj
Hukeri
Belgaum
Khanapur
Haliyal
Supa
Karwar
KOLHAPUR DISTRICT
BIJAPUR DISTRICT
BELGAUM DISTRICT
KARNATAKA
GOA
DHARWAR DISTRICT
KANARA DISTRICT

Indicates inter-State boundary line

Indicates the boundary suggested by the Government of Maharashtra

Indicates the line of demarcation proposed by the commission

Indicates taluka boundaries

Source: From the book "Uncovered Mahajan Report - 1968" by A.R. Antule, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Bombay

sented this, and their sentiments received a fillip when the State of Maharashtra (newly formed in 1960) supported their claims.

MAHAJAN COMMISSION

Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan, a former Chief Justice of India, was chosen to lead a commission on October 25, 1966, to look into the Maharashtra government's demands made in a memo to the Union Home Ministry. The commission interviewed more than 7,000 persons in 1967. While it recommended that some villages of Mysore could be transferred to Maharashtra and vice versa, it maintained that Belgaum city was to remain in Karnataka. With Maharashtra refusing to accept the commission's recommendations, the Mahajan Commission report was not implemented. The Karnataka side still cites the report as the final word on the dispute.

Even decades later, politics in both States frequently bring up the border dispute. The Belagavi City Corporation (BCC) has a slight majority of Marathi speakers over Kannada speakers, and they have often courted controversy by boycotting the Rajyotsava Day annually on November 1 to mark the formation of Karnataka.

The BCC, in fact, serves as a stage for the language politics to be played out in the city as corporators are identified as belonging to Marathi- or Kannada-speaking camps. Marathi-speaking corporators have often accused the Karnataka govern-

---

4

Maharashtra-Karnataka

Belgaum or Belagavi as Marathi and Kannada speakers refer to it, respectively, has been the scene of a long-running conflict.

5

Assam-Arunachal Pradesh

When the north-eastern States were reorganised, Arunachal Pradesh objected to the unilateral transfer to Assam of several forested tracts that had historically belonged to hill tribal chiefs and communities. The Namsai Declaration, which was signed by the Chief Ministers of the two States, has reduced the number of disputed villages from 123 to 86.

ment of denying the linguistic minorities their rights.

In 1980, Marathi speakers in Belgaum protested against the implementation of the Karnataka government-appointed V.K. Gokak Committee report, which advocated that Kannada should be made the language of instruction in primary schools. In 2006, the Karnataka government declared Belgaum as the second capital of Karnataka and began work on a grand legislative assembly modelled on the lines of the Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru. Symbolically, the winter session of the State Legislative Assembly is held in the city.

In 2004, on the eve of a crucial election in Maharashtra, the Maharashtra government filed a suit in the Supreme Court staking its claim for Belgaum (Original Suit No. 4/2004), with the first respondent being the Union of India and the second respondent being the State of Karnataka.

The Maharashtra side argues that the Union of India acted arbitrarily during the 1956 linguistic reorganisation of States. It claims that if the village is taken as a unit, and factors such as linguistic majority and geographical contiguity are taken into consideration, Karnataka should part with the 865 villages that are now spread over the districts of Belagavi, Bidar, Kalaburagi and Uttara Kannada.

Karnataka argues that the village cannot be the basic unit and language cannot be the sole criterion of determining which State a region belongs to. A note prepared by the Karnataka-Maharashtra Border Dispute Special Legal Advisory Committee also refers to the S.K. Dar Commission of 1948, which states that provinces should be formed primarily on the basis of administrative convenience. It also adds a crucial point that linguistic minorities live happily in Karnataka.

PTI

HOME MINISTER Amit Shah addressing the media with Chief Ministers Basavaraj Bommai (to his left) and Eknath Shinde in Delhi on December 14.

Given the heightened emotions surrounding the dispute, a satisfactory resolution will be evasive even if the Supreme Court pronounces a verdict on Maharashtra's suit. This is also dependent on whether the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES), a political party based in Belagavi with the sole agenda of integrating Marathi-speaking parts along the border with Maharashtra, retains popular support in the area.

Commentators say it is now impossible to change the boundaries of the two States as it would open a slew of similar demands from across the country. But the border imbroglio, in which both Marathi and Kannada language chauvinists have a passionate stake, also provides space for politicians in both States to indulge in periodic sabre-rattling to enhance their images in their home States.

In Maharashtra, constituents of the Maha Vikas Aghadi coalition have used the opportunity to target Shinde, while in Karnataka, the Bommai government's belligerent stance is attributed to claims that it has not been aggressive enough in its disavowal of Hindi. The Union government will attempt to soothe sentiments on both sides as the Bharatiya Janata Party is in power in both States (the party is in alliance with the Shinde-led Balasahebanchi Shiv Sena in Maharashtra).

8

Assam-Meghalaya

The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971, defined the boundary of Meghalaya based on a 1951 notification that assigned Blocks I and II to the erstwhile United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district, which was later bifurcated into Kabri Anglong district and North Cachar Hills district (currently Dima Hasao district). The Meghalaya High Court has imposed an interim stay till the next hearing on February 6, 2023, on the operationalisation of an agreement reached between the two States in respect of six of the 12 disputed areas.

6

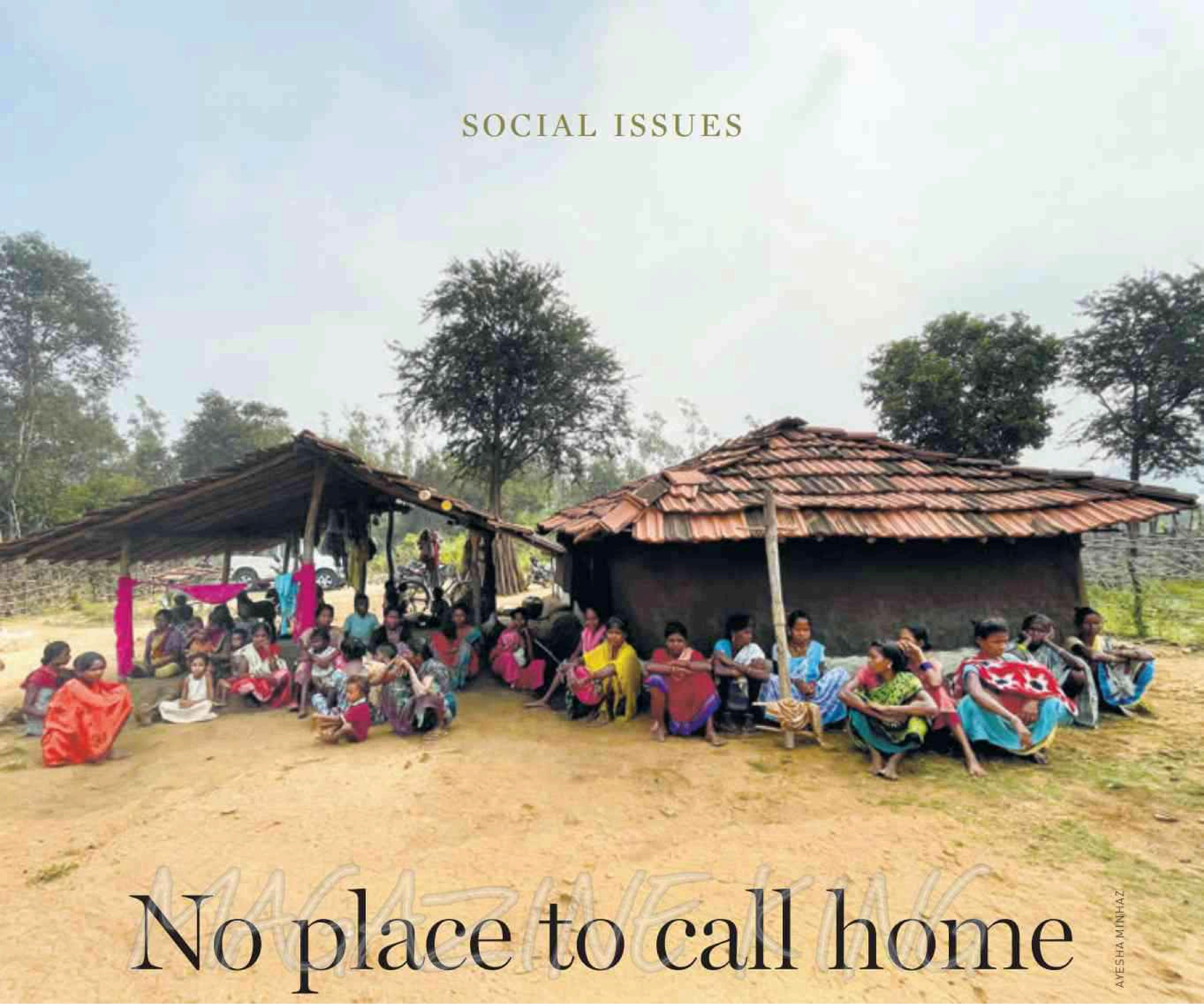
Assam-Nagaland

According to the State of Nagaland Act, 1962, the boundaries of Nagaland comprise (1) Naga Hills district of Assam created in 1866 whose boundaries were defined in the notification of 1925; and (2) Tuensang areas as per Naga Hills-Tuensang Areas Act, 1957. Nagaland demands that the State include all Naga-dominated areas.

7

Assam-Mizoram

Two colonial demarcations—one in 1875 and the other in 1933—are the cause of the conflict. Based on the 1933 notification, the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971, establishes the border between Assam and Mizoram. Mizoram insists on keeping the 1875 boundary.



AYESHA MINHAZ

No place to call home

AT A GUTTI Koya hamlet in Yerrabodu in Bendalapadu gram panchayat of Bhadradri Kothagudem. Gutti Koyas live in makeshift wooden and mud huts, allocating large parcels of land to their cattle, cows, goats, hens, and ducks.

Members of the Gutti Koya tribe, displaced from Chhattisgarh and seeking refuge in Telangana's forests, face a grim future. Unable to return but denied Scheduled Tribe status in their new home, they fight for survival. BY **AYESHA MINHAZ**

VENKAT (NAME CHANGED), who lives in Devanigutta in Mulugu, a border district of Telangana, is unaware of the conflict that forced his parents to flee Chhattisgarh decades ago. Although he has visited Chhattisgarh several times, Venkat considers Telangana home. He farms on two acres of forest land and also travels to nearby villages to work as a daily labourer. Venkat is a member of the Gutti Koya tribal community, and all he wants is a land ownership title, the right to dig a borewell, and a Scheduled Tribe certificate. He has no idea how old he is, but Venkat recalls dropping out of school some 10 years ago. "I want to finish school and get a degree from an open university. I see educated people in nearby villages. I want the same," Venkat said.

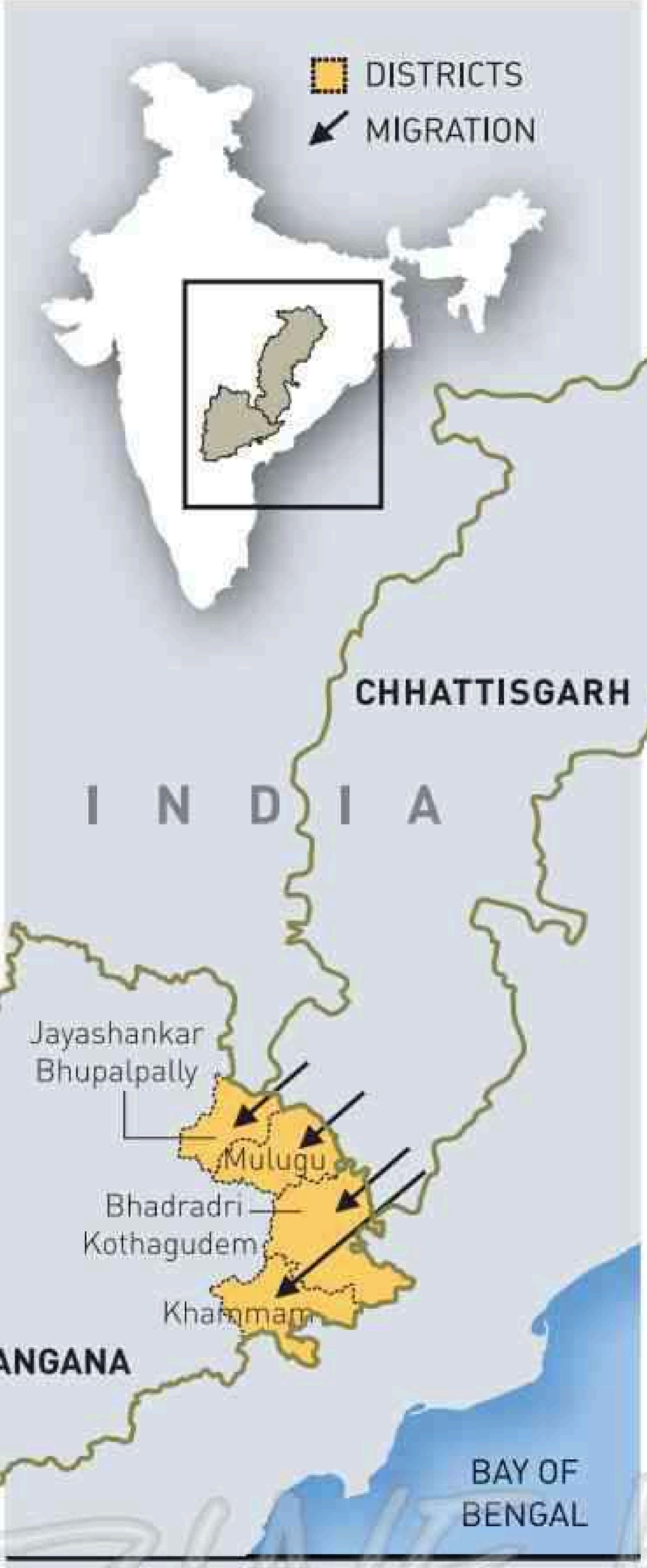
Gutti Koyas, also known as Gotti or Gotte Koyas, are an Adivasi tribe who have been caught in the crossfire that began in 2005-06 between Maoists and Salwa Judum, a militia unit backed by the Chhattisgarh government (later banned by the Supreme Court) for use in its counter-insurgency operations. After their villages were set on fire, their women raped, and fellow tribals killed, the terrified Adivasis of Dantewada, Sukma, Bijapur, and Bastar districts fled to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh (then undivided) and Odisha. Numbers vary on the number of Gutti Koyas who reached Andhra Pradesh to avoid being forcibly taken to government-run camps or having their youth made to join Salwa Judum, but it is estimated that at least 30,000 of them stayed back.

From as early as the 1990s, there is evidence of the migration of the Adivasis of Chhattisgarh into Andhra Pradesh in search of labour and land. However, the "influx was unprecedented" after the formation of Salwa Judum in 2005, notes Nandini Sundar in *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar*.

The majority of Gutti Koyas now live in the forests of Bhadradri Kothagudem, Mulugu, Jayashankar Bhupalpally, and Khammam districts in Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh, Gutti Koyas have settled in far fewer numbers mostly in the forests of East and West Godavari districts. Several of them initially made their living by working on the farms of local people. Through natives, local politicians or brokers, they eventually created settlements in the forest and cultivated rice, maize, pulses, and sesame seeds. Forests were also their natural choice as minor forest produce makes for a good part of the sustenance of Adivasis.

Gutti Koyas, however, are not considered tribals in Telangana. In a strange legal twist, a person's ST status, for the purpose of rights and benefits, cannot be used in the State of migration; the list of STs vary from State to State. This means they are not eligible for any social welfare programmes. This also affects the eligibility of Gutti Koyas to claim titles to forest lands they have cleared for cultivation.

Gutti Koyas have had issues with forest officers since their arrival in Telangana, which was carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014. They have been accused of deforestation, labelled as encroachers, and vilified as land grabbers. The death, on November 22, of Chandrugonda Forest Range Officer Challamalla Srinivas Rao, 42, in an incident involving Gutti Koyas and forest officers, close to Yerrabodu hamlet in Bendalapadu gram panchayat of Bhadradri Kothagudem, is the latest flare-up of the simmering issue.



- Of the Gutti Koyas who fled Chhattisgarh during the Salwa Judum days, it is estimated that some 30,000 stayed back in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
- The majority of Gutti Koyas now live in the forests of Bhadradri Kothagudem, Mulugu, Jayashankar Bhupalpally and Khammam districts in Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh, Gutti Koyas have settled in far fewer numbers mostly in the forests of East and West Godavari districts.
- Gutti Koyas are not considered tribals in Telangana and are classified as "Other Category", which makes them lose the constitutional safeguards granted to Scheduled Tribes.

A FOREST OFFICER'S KILLING

The officials were reportedly there to ensure that Adivasis did not graze their cattle in the reclaimed forest land they had previously cleared for cultivation (called "podu", or shifting, cultivation). According to the first information report (FIR), they tried to prevent Madakam Thula and Podiyam Nanga, two members of the Gutti Koya community, from grazing their cattle there. In "a fit of rage", as the police describe it, the two stabbed the forest officer, who later died.

Although "podu" is traditionally a slash-and-burn system of cultivation, the term is now locally used for all kinds of forest land cultivation, said Palla Trinadha Rao, a lawyer working for tribal rights in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

"Altercations between Gutti Koyas and forest officials over 'podu' lands are not uncommon. But there does not seem to be a direct link between the 'podu' land issue and this murder," a police officer said. Significantly, Srinivas Rao was involved in an altercation with the villagers during the monsoon months this year, which resulted in both sides filing complaints at the Chandrugonda Police Station. The forest officials claimed attacks on them and obstruction of duty, whereas Gutti Koyas claimed harassment and violence against their women. The Telangana State Forest Service Officers' Association has now demanded firearms for protection.

With the death of Srinivas Rao, the call to remove Gutti Koyas from the State has grown louder. The Bendalapadu gram panchayat recently passed a resolution to evict them to Chhattisgarh, but the Telangana High Court overturned it on the basis of a petition filed by three members of the tribe.

"As far as Adivasi culture goes, the border is an artificial one," Nandini Sundar writes in her book. Tribal people have historically seen forests as one contiguous area, and modern State boundaries do not make sense to them.

The issue has once again brought to light the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) such as Gutti Koyas, as well as the ongoing settlement of claims to holders of "podu" lands in Telangana. In 2021, when the government invited applications for titles under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, it received 4.14 lakh claims in 2,845 gram panchayats for 12.49 lakh acres of forest land.

G.N. RAO

CHILDREN of Gutti Koya migrants at an alternative school close to their temporary settlement near Chukkalapadu in the Chintoor mandal of the Khammam district (a 2010 picture).

In the absence of publicly available data on the number of Gutti Koyas residing in Telangana or the amount of forest land they have cleared, officials and politicians have turned to using dog-whistle tactics. Following the murder, unfounded allegations of widespread forest encroachment by Gutti Koyas have been made in the media. Some reports have even portrayed them as the new landlords of Telangana.

LAND GRABBING OR SEEKING A LIVING?

Frontline contacted District Forest Officers (DFO) in Telangana as well as officials from the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) to learn more about Gutti Koya encroachment in their jurisdiction. According to officials, three Gutti Koya hamlets in Khammam have encroached on approximately 30 acres of forest land.

Bhadradri Kothagudem district has the most Gutti Koya settlements in Telangana. While the DFO did not provide figures, it is estimated that there are 120-130 habitations there.

In Jayashankar Bhupalpally district, there are seven Gutti Koya hamlets. In Mulugu district, there are 73 hamlets of Gutti Koya settlements spread across 14,000 acres of forest (carved out of Jayashankar Bhupalpally), with 150-200 Gutti Koyas in each habitation. The DFOs of the remaining districts did not respond, but the numbers in those districts are said to be significantly lower.

When asked how many of the four lakh claims for "podu" titles were by Gutti Koyas, an ITDA officer said it was "difficult to be precise about who filed how many".

AFFORESTATION AND EVICTION

The Gutti Koyas' conflict with the forest department began with the Telangana government's Haritha Haram programme, or afforestation drive, launched in July 2015. In the past three years, forest officials have reclaimed over 100 acres from Yerrabodu. This includes 20 acres reclaimed earlier this year which six Gutti Koya families relied on.

"The department offered me money to safeguard the reforestation in my land," one of them said. He refused the money, partly in rage but largely hoping to claim the land back.

According to a letter from the Valasa Adivasilu Samakhya (VAS), a confederation of displaced tribes based in Telangana, to Harsh Chouhan, the Chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh governments have taken back land from IDPs in at least 75 settlements. The majority of these are from Telangana. "Many IDPs now have become landless and have no source of livelihood to feed their families," it states.

The letter further states that in the past two years, the Telangana forest department reclaimed land from Gutti Koya settlements in nearly 15 habitations spread across 10 mandals of Bhadradri Kothagudem. Several Gutti Koya families in Burgampahad, Palwancha, Karkagudem, Chandrugonda, and Mulkalapalli mandals confirmed that the department had reclaimed land in their hamlets.

"Now I go for work every day in the nearby village," said a woman from a hamlet in Mulkalapalli. She said she used to grow food on less than two acres.

The State, however, views what Gutti Koyas claim as their land as an encroachment. Most officials whom *Frontline* spoke to said: “We are just doing our job of protecting the forests.” Invariably, nothing is heard about the reclamation of lands that have been taken over by non-tribals, including some of the dominant castes in Telangana. In Khammam district alone, half of the 18,000 claims filed were by non-tribals, according to information from the ITDA.

In December 2018, acting on a writ petition (WP 342 of 2018) and taking cognisance of newspaper reports, the High Court of Telangana ordered officers to restrain from “destroying any of the huts and other dwelling units”. The court also ordered Gutti Koyas not to engage in further deforestation.

There have been multiple petitions in the High Court with regard to the evictions. In 2018, the High Court found a district forest officer guilty of contempt of its 2014 order staying the eviction of Gutti Koyas. The officer admitted in court that they “fabricated the Preliminary Offence Report” in order to avoid the contempt case.

In fact, in all the mandals of Bhadradri Kothagudem, at least a dozen cases of contempt of court could have been filed against forest officials for violating the High Court’s stay orders. But not every news clip reaches the High Court, nor every Gutti Koya has the means to find a lawyer.

Eviction attempts have decreased following numerous court petitions, but the debate now is over “podu” lands.

SETTLEMENTS

Rows of Eucalyptus trees planted as part of the afforestation drive line the narrow mud road leading to the decade-old Yerrabodu hamlet. Gutti Koyas live in makeshift wooden and mud huts, allocating large parcels of land to their cattle, cows, goats, hens and ducks.

Ravva Ramesh was the first Gutti Koya to have found this location. Initially, he would come here for work and return to his village in Chhattisgarh seasonally, but after 2002, he stayed back.

The villagers say that much of the conflict between them and the forest department is about unpaid wages and other similar issues. They list all the free work they did for various officials or influential people in the early years of their migration. In a way, several of the tribe’s youngsters learned the skill of cotton farming when one of the local “chowkidars” forced them to work for free on his cotton farm. “We still work for the department on a regular basis, but we also have farms to look after,” said Ravva Ramesh.

AYESHA MINHAZ

AT YERRABODU, politicians informing the Gutti Koya tribals of their rights and assuring them of their support.

“The forest department is not kind to most Adivasis. But to the Adivasis who came from Chhattisgarh, they have reserved even more contempt,” said Ravva Ravi, a tribal.

The Bendalapadu gram panchayat reportedly employed Gutti Koyas of Yerrabodu and others to clear a piece of land and install a solar borewell to water the plants in a nursery. Later, trenches were dug around it to stop Gutti Koyas from drawing water.

ABUSE OF POWER

T. Harikrishna, Warangal district president of the Human Rights Forum, said there have been reports of foresters razing hamlets, beating up Gutti Koyas, and stealing their cattle and farm produce. According to Land Conflict Watch, a data research organisation that tracks natural resource disputes in India, Devanigutta was attacked 11 times by the foresters in four months in 2017.

In exchange for their reliance on the forest, several officials demand labour and other services from Gutti Koyas. It used to be free labour in the early years, but they eventually started paying, though not at the market rate. There are numerous cases of unpaid wages in all hamlets. Gutti Koyas did not mind this as long as they were allowed to live in the forest. It would appear that more than the prevention of encroachment, the officials want their labour supply restored.

“Mainstream them” is the refrain among foresters. “Relocate them to the nearby villages, give them huts, and they can find work in the villages. This solution will benefit all departments and the local people. The villagers will get cheap labour, and we won't have to worry about encroachments," said an officer.

Several senior officials, including District Collectors, have tried to persuade Gutti Koyas to leave the forest in the past, but they have been unsuccessful. "None of us will survive outside the forest," Gutti Koyas say repeatedly.

THE OVERLOOKED PEOPLE

Gutti Koyas are classified as "Other Category" in Telangana, which makes them lose the constitutional safeguards granted to STs. Gutti Koya settlements have not seen much "development", but various departments claim they have made every effort. The officials cite jurisdiction reasons for not being able to intervene further or create better facilities in the forest areas.

Such support also hinges on the relationship of Gutti Koyas with the local people, officials, politicians and NGOs. Electricity is non-existent in most hamlets, but several places have solar lights installed by officials or NGOs. Gutti Koyas have access to public healthcare, and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) visit most hamlets. However, ambulances still cannot reach all areas because roads cannot be laid on forest land. While most of them have voter IDs and Aadhaar cards, several families do not have a ration card or NREGA job card that guarantees 100 days of work a year.

In 2019, the High Court directed the Telangana State Legal Services Authority to submit a report on Gutti Koya hamlets. The 2020 report of the District Legal Services Authority of Khammam, which visited Gutti Koya habitations in Bhadradri Kothagudem, was an eye-opener.

Access to education among Gutti Koyas is appallingly low. A 2017 study by the NGO Save The Children of all 50 Gutti Koya hamlets in the undivided Jayashankar Bhupalapally district says that most children there did not even have a birth certificate, which is essential to sit for the Class X examination.

HISTORICAL INJUSTICE

The displacement of Gutti Koyas from Chhattisgarh was a humanitarian crisis, and it remains so in Telangana because of the numerous demands to evict them from the forests. The majority of the community is reluctant to return to Chhattisgarh, citing potential violence and poverty.

Vasudha Nagaraj, lawyer for the Gutti Koyas in four writ petitions filed in the Telangana High Court, said there was a deliberate obfuscation about granting them ST status. "They are an ST in Chhattisgarh and should be given the same status in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh as well," Vasudha said.

Twice in the past three years, the NCST has given notice to the governments of Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh about the plight of Gutti Koyas, but they have found ways to avoid the issue. The Central government has made no tangible intervention either.

It is a crisis of "statesmanship" in these States, said Shomona Khanna, Supreme Court lawyer and former legal adviser to the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Even if Telangana decided to be "technically absolutely purist" with regard to dealing with claims for titles in forests, she said, it was still possible to make allowances for Gutti Koyas with "help from the Chhattisgarh government to help identify them as forest dwellers".

> There have been reports of foresters razing hamlets, beating up Gutti Koyas, and stealing their cattle and farm produce.

Palla Trinadha Rao proposes two options: One is for the Central government to declare Gutti Koyas as STs in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The other is for the Chhattisgarh and Central governments to collaborate on a rehabilitation and resettlement package for them. Earlier this year, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel stated that his government would devise a strategy to "create a conducive environment" for rehabilitating those displaced during Salwa Judum. Nothing has happened so far.

In India, a more recent precedent for IDP resettlement can be found in Tripura. In 1997, 34,000 Bru-Reang tribals fled Mizoram and settled in Tripura due to ethnic conflict. According to a Press Information Bureau release, Home Minister Amit Shah announced a Rs.600 crore package that includes residential plots in addition to a Rs.4 lakh fixed deposit, Rs.5,000 cash every month for two years, free ration for two years, and Rs.1.5 lakh to build a house. The government of Tripura was to provide the land under this agreement.

In Telangana, it is unclear how the State intends to handle the Gutti Koyas once the "podu" claims are settled. The resurfacing of this issue could be the litmus test for the Bharat Rashtra Samithi to gain legitimacy. The officials from the various departments coordinating this process said they would act "as per the law".

Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao initially did not plan to repatriate Gutti Koyas to Chhattisgarh, but the forest department is pressuring him to do so now. The party appears to be seeking solutions.

Some Congress leaders raise the issue sporadically. Danasari Anasuya, also known as Seethakka, the Congress MLA from Mulugu, said that the State should find a way to grant the Gutti Koyas ST status.

Once that happens, Venkat plans to go back to completing his education, ensuring that generations after him have better access to development. ☐

‘Bofors pales into insignificance’

Interview with Ravi Nair and Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, authors of *The Rafale Deal: Flying Lies?* BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

ONE of the most talked-about defence deals in recent times was the purchase of the Rafale fighter aircraft from France in 2015-16. There were allegations of procedural wrongdoing, inflated costs, and cronyism by the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government.

Recently, journalists Ravi Nair and Paranjoy Guha Thakurta published a 500-page book detailing the many unanswered questions in the government's acquisition of 36 aircraft in a “fly-away condition”, the scrapping of a previous deal, and the unilateral decision of the Prime Minister in this matter. Excerpts from their interview to *Frontline:*

The Rafale deal has been described as India's largest arms deal scandal by N. Ram in the foreword to your book. Your comments.

Ravi Nair: As of now, this is the largest capital procurement deal for our defence forces. Defence experts have described this as the mother of all defence deals in the book. Though the number of aircraft bought was fewer, the amount that was spent was about Rs.60,000 crore. It is not just about the money that was paid but the procedural violations that were involved. There is no evidence that the air force or the Defence Ministry was consulted, or that the then Defence Minister was aware.

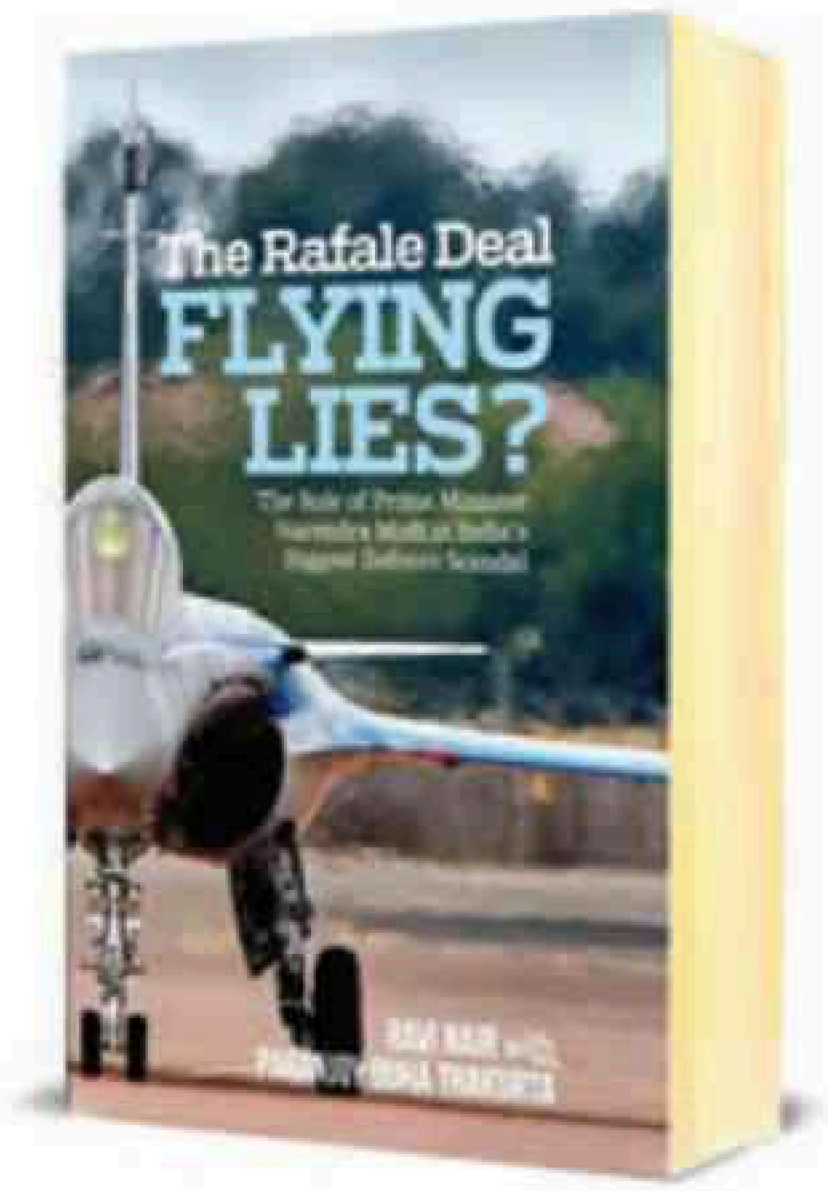
Paranjoy Guha Thakurta: To add to what Ravi has said, if one looks back at the Bofors deal in 1986-87, and factoring in inflation, the amount [in the Rafale deal] is much bigger. Bofors pales into insignificance if compared to the Rafale deal. The Bofors deal was around Rs.64 crore. Rafale involved 36 aircraft, Rs.60,000 crore and an offset part of the deal which is half of that amount. It is not just the procedures that were not followed, but the offset deal was given to a group, the Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group, that had no experience in manufacturing defence aircraft. This was a group that was steeped in debt. Their lawyers had told a London court in so many words.

RN: What was curious was that the offset contract was given to a company that was incorporated three days after the Prime Minister's announcement. The benchmarking price of domain experts in the Indian negotiating team was 5.3 billion euros. When the deal was concluded, it went up by 2.5 billion euros. It was not a small amount.

PGT: It went up by 40 per cent. What we have documented in the book is that the views of the MoD and Law Ministry officials were ignored. Some of them were also shunted out. That is why it is a big scandal. In the Bofors case, there was a money trail. In this case, the procedural lapses were immense.

RN: In the case of Bofors, the government was ready to order an investigation. But in this case, the government was not ready to do so. The Enforcement Directorate has documents relating to the money transactions of this particular deal and relating to a particular individual. Dassault had engaged a subcontractor in India to supply flight simulators, and optical and electronic systems for aircraft.

PGT: The company was called Defsys. It had no prior experience of manufacturing replica aircraft. One Sushen Mohan Gupta was the director of the company, and it had been blacklisted by the MoD as it was allegedly involved in the AgustaWestland deal when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was in power. But the same man [Gupta] who was also involved in the Rafale deal is not being investigated. In the Bofors deal, there was a Joint Parliamentary Committee. It is another matter that nothing came out of it. In this case, whatever investigation is happening is taking place in France.



The Bofors deal was around Rs.64 crore. Rafale involved 36 aircraft, Rs.60,000 crore ... and the offset deal was given to a group that had no experience in manufacturing defence aircraft.

Your book details many procedural lapses. You also quote unnamed sources. Would it have helped if air force or defence personnel had pointed out the flaws in the deal publicly?

RN: A few years ago, the government issued a notification that any retired senior government official writing an article or being quoted by journalists needed to take permission. When we started, many retired personnel came forward but requested us to withhold their names for obvious reasons.

PGT: One retired government official from the Indian Administrative Service, Sudhanshu Mohanty, had the courage to come forward. We have quoted him. We contacted several people, including the former head of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Suvarna Raju. He gave short interviews to the media urging that the government should disclose the agreement between Dassault Aviation and HAL so that people would know how the negotiations for 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft were still on and how it was scrapped.

You question the declaration of intent by the Prime Minister in your book. Why was it wrong? Surely, the executive is empowered to take decisions.

RN: The executive is not one person. There are around 80 Ministries. Every Ministry has a certain portfolio to handle. The Defence Ministry is there to handle Defence purchases. The reason why there is a thing called the Defence Procurement Policy (DPP) is because public money is involved. The Defence Minister or the Foreign Secretary had no clue that the Prime Minister would make such an announcement. Manohar Parrikar, the then Defence Minister, said he received a call from National Security Adviser Ajit Doval that the Prime Minister had made an announcement. He said it was the bold decision of a strong leader.

PGT: Whatever we have been able to reconstruct of what happened that day is based on reports, including that by Col. Ajay Shukla who revealed at our book launch on December 5 that the person sitting next to Manohar Parrikar told Shukla that the Minister was ashen-faced when he got to know that the old deal had been scrapped. Parrikar was on his way to Goa. If everything was hunky-dory and it was a statement of intent, why were procedures suddenly put in place after the announcement? The Defence Procurement Policy is the government's own policy.

RN: The announcement was wrong due to other reasons as well. The government issued a Request for Proposal, or RFP, and six companies submitted their bids. The government told the Supreme Court that the process to withdraw the (old) RFP began in March 2015 and in July 2015 it was withdrawn. When the negotiations were still officially on, the Prime Minister should not have announced an intent to acquire a lower number of 36 aircraft on April 10. It created another problem. The IAF wanted 126 aircraft. In a way, the Prime Minister's unilateral announcement put national security at risk. After this, the government had to go for another RFI [Request for Information] from the same set of manufacturers. But that did not reach the RFP stage even.

PGT: The earlier deal was for 126 aircraft with 18 in a fly-away condition. The remaining were to be manufactured by HAL. The Prime Minister who talks about Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India grossly undermined the public sector.

So what would you say was the worst damage? The cost to the exchequer, procedural lapses, compromising national security, or cronyism?

RN: All of this. The procedural violations to help the cronies at a high cost put national security at risk.

PGT: It is like asking which is worse, corruption or communalism.

How serious was the undermining of the public sector?

RN: We have gone through the RFP of 2007 in detail. It clearly mentioned that the lead integrator would be HAL. This meant that there could be enough sub vendors but, at the end of the day, the main airframe, the avionics and the engine were to be manufactured by HAL. There was an MoU between Dassault and a subsidiary company of Reliance Industries Limited in 2010 to make certain parts of Falcon, the business jet of Dassault Aviation. This was not a fighter aircraft. After two years nothing happened. The MoU lapsed. It is an obfuscation by the government and the then CEO of Dassault Aviation, Eric Trappier, to claim that the Rafale deal was a continuation of the earlier agreement.

PGT: HAL as one of our Navratnas may have had a lot of limitations. It was unable to make the Light Combat Aircraft Tejas over decades. The IAF may have had its own problems with HAL. There were issues about who would guarantee the entire production. Dassault said it would ensure the production of the 18 aircraft. There were disputes about man-hours as well. The solution to the problem was not to finish off HAL but to strengthen it. One can say HAL needed to be better, but this was no way to bridge the trust deficit between the IAF and HAL.

The contract negotiating committee did not find anything wrong in the selection of Rafale. Both the UPA and the NDA opted for Dassault as it was among the lowest bids. Yet there were transparency issues in both governments.

RN: The then Defence Minister, A.K. Antony, set up two committees to look into complaints made by Mysura Reddy and Subramanian Swamy about the selection of Rafale. Both committees gave the government a clean chit. A third internal committee, comprising domain experts, submitted its report to the Narendra Modi government to say that Dassault was not the lowest bidder. It took three years for this to come out. This was unbelievable. These were domain experts who had all the documents to clear the lowest bidder. How did it take them three years to say that Dassault was not the lowest bidder?

The 2007 RFP was clear. HAL would be the lead integrator. Dassault was to give a guarantee of the entire lot of 126 aircraft and that it would work with HAL. The government had all the right to impose huge penalties on Dassault for creating obstacles after participating in the tender and winning the bid as the lowest bidder. The government could have encashed the security deposit.

PGT: We can discuss processes, lowest bid, etc. As in the case of Bofors, the issue was not about quality as much as the flouting of processes.

RN: The Prime Minister's announcement put the government in a fix. It became a *fait accompli*. Dassault now knew the government would not penalise them for violating the agreement as per the earlier RFP.

PGT: By not insisting on a sovereign guarantee or a bank guarantee, and on an anti-corruption clause but just a letter of comfort, and by agreeing that the seat of arbitration would be in Geneva, the announcement weakened India's negotiating powers with Dassault.

What we have also shown in this book is that India's position got further weakened when the Indian negotiating team was sidelined and the NSA, who had no *locus standi*, participated in the Rafale deal.

RN: The involvement of the NSA compromised India's negotiating position even further. Ajit Doval agreed to many of the terms put by the French side. The reason why Doval pushed it was because the Prime Minister had already announced it. The government said it was an emergency purchase.

Do you think that the powers to tweak the DPP at will lies at the crux of the problem?

RN: Interestingly, the government told the Supreme Court that it had followed the principles laid down in the 2013 DPP. The main agreement for Rafale was signed under that DPP. But the offset agreement was signed under an amended 2016 DPP. The same government fined Dassault aviation for not fulfilling its offset obligations. The Minister of State for Home, told Parliament that the government had fined Dassault and the main supplier of avionics.

PGT: We had a three-hour-long interview with Air Marshal Raghunath Nambiar. It was recorded. He defended the government. We redacted portions that he didn't want published. According to him, the DPP was a sort of stumbling block. Short of saying scrap this document, he said, it was a big stumbling block.

RN: The current DPP was a creation of the Vajpayee government.

PGT: One of the most scandalous parts of this whole deal was that the government gave an unsigned note to the former Chief Justice of India. It said that the Comptroller and Auditor General had presented a report to the Public Accounts Committee with the pricing details.

RN: When the government said this, the CAG had not even begun its audit. It redacted the price at which the aircraft was bought. In the report, there is a list of 11 capital procurements by the IAF, including the 36 Rafale aircraft. If 10 deals are added up and one subtracts the remainder from the total, it emerges that Rs.62,000 crore was spent on the eleventh one, the Rafale deal.

What do you think should be done now considering there is no money trail. There is a judicial probe in France.

RN: If the government feels its hands are clean, then it should order an investigation, either Supreme Court monitored or by a Joint Parliamentary Committee. It should especially explore the role of the defence broker Sushen Gupta and his offshore companies.

PGT: Having stonewalled all questions on the deal, it would be unrealistic to expect the government to investigate the deal. In France, when the French investigators went to Dassault Aviation and the former CEO, they were denied documents on grounds of national security. What may or may not happen in India in the foreseeable future, much depends on what happens in France. ☐

A death in CBI custody

The custodial death of Lalan Sheikh, main accused in the Rampurhat massacre case, is a big loss of face for the CBI at a time when the Trinamool Congress appears all but cornered by Central agencies in multiple corruption cases. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

LALAN SHEIKH (left) and one of the burnt houses in Bagtui village. (Right) Family members of Lalan Sheikh during his funeral in Birbhum on December 14.

THE DEATH OF LALAN Sheikh, the main accused in the Rampurhat massacre case, when he was in the custody of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has stirred up a major political storm in West Bengal. On Dcember 12, Lalan Sheikh's body was found hanging in the toilet of a CBI camp office in Rampurhat, Birbhum district. While the CBI claimed it was suicide, Sheikh's family members insist that he was murdered while in custody.

The custodial death has come as a major loss of face for the CBI. At a time when the Trinamool Congress is getting cornered by Central agencies in multiple corruption cases, Lalan Sheikh's death comes as an opportunity to strike back at the CBI and the BJP at the Centre.

On March 21, a mob led by Lalan Sheikh set ablaze several houses in Bogtui village in the Rampurhat region, and 10 people, including a child, were burnt alive. The arson was in retaliation to the murder of Bhadu Sheikh, a deputy panchayat pradhan, earlier that day. Both Bhadu Sheikh and Lalan Sheikh were members of the ruling party, though they belonged to opposite camps. The Calcutta High Court ordered the CBI to take over the massacre case on March 25 from the State government-appointed Special Investigation Team. On April 8, it directed the agency to investigate the murder of Bhadu Sheikh also.

Twenty-one people have been arrested in connection with the massacre. The main accused, Lalan Sheikh, however, managed to give the authorities the slip and was finally apprehended in Jharkhand on December 3.

WIFE'S COMPLAINT

When Sheikh's body was discovered in the toilet in the CBI camp, pictures showed him in his underwear, hanging with a towel wrapped around his neck and his feet touching the ground. His wife, Reshma Bibi, alleged that he was tortured by the CBI personnel and then murdered. She claimed that on the day he died, Sheikh was brought to his house in Bogtui village, apparently to recover a hard disk. In her complaint to the Rampurhat police, Reshma Bibi wrote that Sheikh was subjected to severe "mental pressure" and "physical torture" and referred to his death as a "murder".

She also accused the CBI of demanding a bribe of Rs.50 lakh from her in return for "saving them from the case". She named seven CBI officials in her complaint, including one of DIG rank and another of SP rank. She also demanded a probe by the West Bengal Criminal Investigation Department (CID). "They beat up and tortured my husband in an effort to force him to mention some big names. By forcing him to lie, they wanted to involve some big names in the case," she wrote in her complaint. She claimed that her husband himself had told her all this when he was being taken from CBI custody to the court for the first time.

Sheikh's death and Reshma Bibi's allegations sparked off violent protests outside the CBI camp office at Rampurhat. Members of Sheikh's family, joined by a section of villagers from Bogtui, demanded that action be taken against the CBI official responsible for the death. They burnt tyres on the national highway leading to Bogtui village and tried to force their way into the CBI camp office.

PTI

CID PROBE

Soon after Reshma Bibi's allegations, the State government ordered the CID to investigate the case. On December 14, the Calcutta High Court allowed the CID to investigate the custodial death even though the CBI had moved the court earlier requesting that the case be transferred to an "independent body" outside the control of the State government. Earlier, on December 13, a public interest litigation petition moved in the Calcutta High Court sought an inquiry into the case by a High Court judge.

Though the High Court allowed a CID probe, it nevertheless raised questions regarding some of the allegations made by Reshma Bibi and directed the CID not to take coercive steps against the CBI officials mentioned in her complaint. In his order, Justice Jay Sengupta said: "It is uncanny indeed to see the names of the investigating officers of other high-profile cases being taken as names of accused in the present case. Even high-ranking officers of the CBI, like a DIG, have been named there, in a rather far-fetched manner." The court also ordered that the investigation be videographed and that the final report should be filed only after getting the court's permission.

CBI'S LOSS OF FACE

The Trinamool Congress has over the last few months been reeling under allegations of corruption and finds itself cornered by the arrest of several top leaders by Central agencies. While the ruling party has maintained that the Central agencies are being used by the Union government to harass its political opponents, Sheikh's death has given the Trinamool an opportunity to train its guns on the CBI itself. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said: "I condemn the incident. And if the CBI is so smart, then why is he dead? It took place in their custody. The CBI has to provide details. His wife lodged an FIR; we will also raise the issue."

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Congress also voiced their concern about Sheikh's death and demanded a judicial inquiry. Senior CPI(M) leader Sujan Chakraborty pointed out that such deaths in CBI custody would naturally raise questions whether it was a conspiracy or not. "In this situation there can be no alternative to a judicial inquiry. But the CBI will also have to answer and cannot avoid responsibility. Whether he was guilty or not, a death in custody cannot be accepted," he said.

Soon after the incident, Ajay Bhatnagar, Additional Director of the CBI, arrived in Kolkata and made enquiries on the events leading to Sheikh's death. One of the questions that is repeatedly asked is how his body was discovered with its feet touching the ground.

WAR OF WORDS

The death sparked off a fresh war of words between the Trinamool and the BJP. Kunal Ghosh, Trinamool's State general secretary and spokesperson, said: "There are many able officers in the CBI, but we suspect that the organisation is being used for political gains. The death of Lalan Sheikh is extremely important and we demand a proper and impartial investigation." Referring to an earlier statement by Suvendu Adhikari, Leader of the Opposition, in the Assembly, that December 12, 14, and 21 will be "significant dates" in West Bengal, Ghosh asked: "Did Suvendu Adhikari mark December 12 for this event?"

Responding to the allegation, Samik Bhattacharya, West Bengal's BJP spokesperson, countered: "It can easily be figured who gains with the death of Lalan Sheikh. We got to know from media reports that Sheikh was cooperating with the investigation. His death at an important time like this is mysterious. Why and how it happened; and who is responsible for it, only the court and the CBI can tell." ☐

COLUMN

ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

The pension debate

As several State governments consider reverting to the old pension scheme for their employees, arguing that the new scheme has not delivered on its promises, the Centre has launched a propaganda war to discredit their decision.

IN moves that are gathering momentum, a number of State governments are announcing or implementing decisions to reverse their shift to the new pension scheme (NPS) designed largely by the Centre. Arguing that the NPS has not delivered on its promises, they have decided to restore the old pension scheme (OPS).

All of these States—Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Punjab, and most recently Himachal Pradesh—are ruled by parties other than the BJP. The Central government, given its commitment to the NPS, and State governments ruled by the BJP and its allies are not in favour of such a shift, especially since the new scheme was introduced by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. Rather, they have joined the criticism by mainstream economists that such a shift was bound to precipitate a fiscal crisis in States opting for the reversion, and attribute the move to a cynical effort to garner some voter support at the expense of fiscal prudence.

Under the OPS, those who were members of the scheme, which consisted mainly of regular employees of the Central and State governments, made no contribution while they were in service and were eligible for a pension on retirement equal to half of the last drawn pay (the “defined benefit”). In addition, as was the case with their salaries prior to retirement, they were eligible for a dearness allowance linked to inflation, which was a proportion of their basic pension.

The design of this scheme meant that the pension bill of institutions offering its benefits was funded out of their current revenues. The understanding was that such payments ensuring the security of employees after their retirement were a necessary commitment to employees in the civil services. Finding the resources needed to fund the scheme was also, therefore, the responsibility of the state. This is by no means an Indian innovation. Similar schemes have been in operation in a number of countries.

Outside of the civil services, a mandatory retirement savings scheme applies to institutions that employ 20 workers or more. In such institutions, the employee is required to contribute around 10 per cent of his/her salary to the scheme, which is matched by a contribution from the employer, and the sum thus accumulated is managed by the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation. On retirement, the employee is eligible for a lump sum payment, a part or all of which has to be invested in schemes that offer a regular annuity payment, which serves as the pension.

In a country where most workers are either employed in small informal sector units or are “self-employed”, most citizens were left out of this scheme as well. To provide for those who could not earn enough to save for when they can no longer work, official social protection schemes included one offering a non-contributory pension for those below some officially defined poverty line, though the sum paid to the pensioner in these schemes is paltry.

In sum, the current controversy about a return to the OPS is of relevance largely to schemes operated by the Central and State governments. The decision to scrap the OPS and replace it with the NPS was justified on the grounds that the OPS was not fiscally sustainable. The increased life expectancy of government employees, resulting from improved access to health services, and the increases in per person pensions resulting from increases in the dearness allowance warranted by inflation resulted in an increase in the pension bill of the Centre and the States.

On the other hand, revenues were not rising fast enough. This meant that other expenditures, including social sector spending, had to be curtailed, if the fiscal deficit and the level of borrowing relative to GDP was not to rise.

This argument gives rise to two obvious questions. First, why were revenues not keeping pace with increases in the pension bill? Second, what determines the level of the deficit and borrowing that are considered as the binding limits beyond which they cannot be raised? The answers to these questions differ for the Centre and the State governments.

In the case of the Centre, revenue growth has been tardy because of the fiscal fallout of the embrace of neoliberalism, which involved adopting a lenient tax regime to incentivise the private sector, which was expected to lead development now. In 2019-20, for example, the effective tax rate on profit-making companies surveyed by the tax authorities was just 22.5 per cent, whereas the required statutory rate (without exemptions and concessions) was 34 per cent for companies with an income above just Rs.10 crore.

Neoliberalism also meant that the fiscal deficit must be capped, because of the need to appease finance capital, which considers deficit financed spending as reflective of a profligate state and as inimical to its interests. So that sets a limit on aggregate spending growth. If that limit falls below the rate at which the pension bill rises, then either tax revenues will have to be raised or other expenditures will have to be curtailed.

Given the neoliberal commitment to incentivise private profit-making, the potential for increases in tax revenues was ignored. So, expenditure had to be curtailed to ensure adjustment. But, given inherited expenditure commitments, a fiscal crunch was the likely outcome. Just as the Centre voluntarily offered tax concessions to the corporate sector and chose to rein in its fiscal deficit, it chose to voluntarily withdraw the OPS in 2004.

SCRAP NPS
AAG
PTI

A MEMBER of the All Assam Government NPS Employees' Association at a protest demanding restoration of the old pension scheme, in Guwahati on November 8, 2022.

WEAKENING FISCAL FEDERALISM

In the case of the States, the issue is more complex. State revenues have been squeezed by the Centre that has addressed its own fiscal problems by whittling down revenues from taxes that have to be shared with the States and relying on cesses and surcharges that are not part of the divisible pool. As had been pointed out by the Finance Minister of Tamil Nadu to the Union Finance Minister, the share of cesses and surcharges in the Centre's revenue has risen from 10.4 per cent of gross tax revenue in 2011-12 to 26.7 per cent in 2021-22. Secondly, State revenues have been battered by the implementation of the GST regime, and the Centre has inadequately compensated them for the shortfall and has brought to an end the compensation regime as of July 2022.

In addition, forced to enact Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Acts of their own, there are stringent limits set on deficit spending by the States, which do not have the flexibility, unlike the Centre, to unilaterally raise the fiscal deficit even in the midst of a crisis. This pushed them into following the Centre and replacing the OPS with the NPS.

To divert attention from the fact that neoliberalism and the weakening of fiscal federalism were responsible for the crisis in response to which the OPS was being abandoned, the Central government and the advocates of neoliberalism defended the NPS as being a win-win solution.

Under the NPS, public employees hired after 2004 have to contribute 10 per cent of their pay (the "defined contribution") to a fund, with the employer providing a counterpart contribution of up to 14 per cent of the salary. The accumulating sums are invested in funds managed by designated "independent" pension fund managers paid for their services. When employees retire, they have the choice of taking out sums amounting to a maximum of 60 per cent of the corpus and investing the rest in an annuity scheme, returns from which constitute the pension. This scheme is mandatory for government employees, but private sector employers and their employees are also eligible to join versions of the scheme.

The argument was that while the employee contributes to the creation of the corpus that finally delivers the pension, the government still contributes a share and the management of those funds by professional fund managers will raise the sums received by the employee at and after retirement. But the pension received is not defined and would depend on how well the corpus is managed by the fund manager.

There are many market risks that the employee is subject to here. The market may not deliver expected returns or may even wipe out a large part of the savings in the event of a crash, as happened with American pensioners during the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, the professional fund manager, who receives a fee whatever the outcome, may not be as smart or savvy as is presumed. There are enough instances to suggest that this is highly probable. Since there is no guaranteed benefit but only a defined contribution, these risks are significant.

In practice, the Indian experience thus far has not been too comforting, as a federation of Central government employees' unions underlined in a letter to the Cabinet Secretary. It quoted many examples where the NPS fell way short of the OPS.

> Pensions are part of the rewards provided for government service... not a special benefit that accrues because of state largesse.

THE NPS FALLS SHORT

A defence establishment official who retired after more than 13 years of service received only 15 per cent of what he was eligible for under the OPS. Another with a basic pay of Rs.34,300 received Rs.2,506 as monthly pension after more than 15 years of service, whereas under the OPS, he would have been entitled to Rs.17,150 as pension. There is no shortage of such case histories.

As noted, the government, too, still carries a burden. It contributes to the pension fund, so it records an outgo in its budget, even if not of the same magnitude as earlier. The real beneficiaries of the shift are the fund managers earning fees and commissions for managing other people's money with no commitment to ensure a guaranteed return. Moreover, if they are pressured to deliver larger returns, the push to allocate more of the corpus to instruments that promise higher returns intensifies. But that increases the risk of loss that can worsen the already poor returns accruing to pensioners.

Given actual experience, the argument that the NPS offers more than the OPS has been dropped. The emphasis now is on the argument that returning to the OPS would only deliver a fiscal crisis and that opposition State governments are reverting to it only to woo voters. It is also held there is no reason why a small section of civil servants should enjoy this benefit, making them a protected elite.

This is a peculiar argument. None would argue that because a multinational executive earns many multiples of what a senior civil servant is paid, the former should be deprived of his negotiated salary. There are two issues here. Civil servants are paid to serve the interests of the state and, through it, society, and pensions are part of the rewards that are provided for that service. It is not a special benefit that accrues because of special state largesse. And second, what is important is to expand the net of those eligible for defined benefit pensions to secure their retirement future, and not to deprive even the few who have it of the benefits of the scheme.

The Centre, however, is working hard to push the opposition-led State governments into abandoning the return to the OPS. It has launched a propaganda war to discredit their decision. The Pension Fund Regulatory Development Authority is also refusing to return the corpus accumulated by these States and their employees under the NPS, even though they would now not be availing of pensions under that scheme. The fear is that if employees in some States are able to regain the benefit of the OPS, the demand for a similar shift from employees of the Central government will only intensify. Acceding to that demand would be to accept that the shift to the NPS was wrong. But as the experience with demonetisation has shown, the government at the Centre is unlikely to admit that it made a mistake. ☐

C.P. Chandrasekhar taught for more than three decades at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is currently Senior Research Fellow at the Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, US.

Digital foray

The launch of the digital rupee, while taking the Central government's digitalisation project forward, misses the point that societal transformation is not possible without addressing inherent structural inequalities. BY **RANA MITRA**

IN RECENT TIMES, THE financial world has been in a state of excitement after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced the launch of the pilot for a retail digital rupee (e₹-R) on December 1. Before that, on November 1, the pilot for a wholesale version of the digital rupee (e₹-W), essentially for bank-to-bank transactions in government securities, was launched.

As announced by the RBI, the pilot of e₹-R will cover select locations in closed user groups comprising participating customers and merchants.

The e₹-R will be in the form of a "digital token" and like other paper/fiat currency, represent legal tender. As in paper/fiat currency, the responsibility for proving the genuineness of the token lies with the holder.

According to the RBI, it will be issued in the same denominations as current denominations of paper currency and coins. It will be distributed through intermediaries, that is, banks. Users will be able to transact with e₹-R through a digital wallet offered by participating banks that will be stored on mobile phones or devices. Transactions can be both person-to-person (P2P) and person-to-merchant (P2M). Payments to merchants can be made using QR codes displayed at merchant locations.

According to the RBI, e₹-R will offer features of physical cash such as trust, safety, and settlement finality guaranteed by the RBI. As in the case of cash, it will not earn any interest and can be converted to other forms of money, like deposits with banks. The pilot will test the robustness of the entire process of digital rupee creation, distribution, and retail usage in real time.

YES BANK
DIGITAL RUPEE (e₹)
ACCEPTED HERE
SCAN TO PAY
POWERED BY YES BANK
YES BANK
e₹
DIGITAL RUPEE
ACCEPTED HERE

Different features and applications of the e₹-R token and architecture will be tested in future rollouts, based on the learnings from the pilot. The RBI said in a release that it has identified eight banks for phase-wise participation in the pilot.

The first phase will begin with four banks, namely, State Bank of India, ICICI Bank, Yes Bank, and IDFC First Bank, in four cities. Four more banks, namely, Bank of Baroda, Union Bank of India, HDFC Bank, and Kotak Mahindra Bank, will join subsequently. It is most surprising that the pilot bypasses most of the other robust public sector banks in the country.

PILOT COVERAGE

The pilot will initially cover Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru, and Bhubaneswar, and later be extended to Ahmedabad, Gangtok, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Indore, Kochi, Lucknow, Patna, and Shimla. Strangely enough, for reasons best known to the RBI, the first and second phases are programmed to exclude Kolkata and Chennai, which are important economic centres.

The apex bank said in the release that the scope of the pilot may be expanded gradually to include more banks, users, and locations, as needed.

CRYPTO GAMBLE

It is to be noted that with the threat of cryptocurrency (nicknamed "crypto"), which began with Bitcoin in 2009, now beginning to rock global financial markets (though in a limited scale owing to its narrow presence), with the active aid of neoliberal shenanigans scripting a unique form of "gamble" in order to make money outside any government and central bank control, governments all over the world are helpless in dealing with a form of money that has no physical presence (as it is purely digital in nature) and neither is it subject to any government or central bank control.

This is mainly because of the unique nature of its operation based on blockchain technology that is available to core user groups of financial wizards. So, in every country, the dangers posed by different forms of cryptos threaten the very existence of official currency.

It has also made the prospects of money and fiscal management really difficult, as the entire mining of and dealings involving cryptos occur outside the formal banking and financial channels of countries.

However, the exponential growth of such “parallel private currencies” now seems to be facing a strong headwind, as many a player in what is essentially a gambling business has lost huge amounts following the collapse of crypto exchanges such as FTX.

Hence, the number of cryptos, which grew from 66 in 2013 to peak at 10,397 in February 2022, has now fallen to 9,310. Against this backdrop, central banks in several countries have launched pilots of their own version of a central bank digital currency (CBDC). This is now being touted by mainstream media as if it is a panacea for all the ills dogging a country’s economy, while also addressing problems such as financial inclusion.

> Digital technology essentialism, as being projected now through “Digital India”, is not always the best way to deliver public services.

NEED FOR CBDC

In view of the threat posed by private currencies such as cryptos, CBDCs may seem to be the need of the hour to meet the threat of loss of monetary and later fiscal authority of the sovereign. There are no two opinions on the efficacy of the CBDCs (the Indian version being e₹-R) if juxtaposed only against the use of private currencies. In that case, the RBI’s e₹-R pilot is a welcome step. However, the story does not end there.

One has to be essentially naive to ignore the larger implications of the overall political economy of digitalisation being attempted in a class-ridden capitalist economy in the neoliberal era. The way the debate is being put across by mainstream media, it appears that as bona fide citizens our choice is limited: digitalise or perish.

In such a debate, the dominant voice, as usual, is of the government and of interests represented by finance capitalists. The increasing question and danger of surveillance by the government and curtailment of individual freedom are now expectedly occupying a back seat. However, the danger is real, even with CBDCs.

Interestingly, while discussing the possibility of a CBDC in the United Kingdom in 2021, Sir Jon Cunliffe, the Bank of England’s Deputy Governor for Financial Stability, said that programming a digital currency for commercial or social purposes was something the British government needed to consider. He said: “You could think of giving your children pocket money, but programming the money so that it couldn’t be used for sweets.”

There is another danger of data being collected and eventually used while one transacts on a digital platform, unlike in cash/currency transactions, where such possibility is eliminated *ab initio*. So, “programmable digital currency” is a real

Cryptoexpress
www.cryptoxpress.io
GETTY IMAGES

AT THE THAILAND Crypto Expo 2022 in Bangkok on May 14. It was an opportunity for visitors to learn about blockchain projects and cryptocurrency exchanges.

danger that will likely be a reality in the neoliberal era. Despite the advantages of a digital rupee, there is clear and present danger that its use would be closely monitored by the state, thereby leading to curtailment of individual freedom, huge abuse of data mining, and exponential growth of businesses based on digitalisation.

In a country like India, with the existence and frequent reported abuses of the Telegraph Act, 1885, (notwithstanding the safeguards introduced following a Supreme Court judgment in 2007) to eavesdrop on citizens' communications, the danger of surveillance by the state even in bona fide private exchange of digital currency is a cause for concern despite the assurances given by the RBI Governor.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Despite the RBI promising the convenience of offline transactions for the use of e₹-R (which eventually may require an online platform to connect the dots before final settlement), one need not be an expert in economic sciences to fathom the real subtext of the digital rupee being launched and used in a country like India where a significant digital divide still exists.

An Oxfam publication titled "Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide", said that only 31 per cent of the rural population of India uses the Internet against 67 per cent of urban folk.

Only about 9 per cent of students enrolled in any course had access to a computer connected to the Internet and only 25 per cent of enrolled students had access to the Internet through any kind of device.

The report emphatically observed that the digital revolution of the finance sector has kept the digitally disconnected away from its benefits. The likelihood of digital payment by the richest 60 per cent is four times more than the poorest 40 per cent. The gender divide is also sharp, with only 31 per cent of the female population enjoying access to the Internet against 61 per cent of the male population.

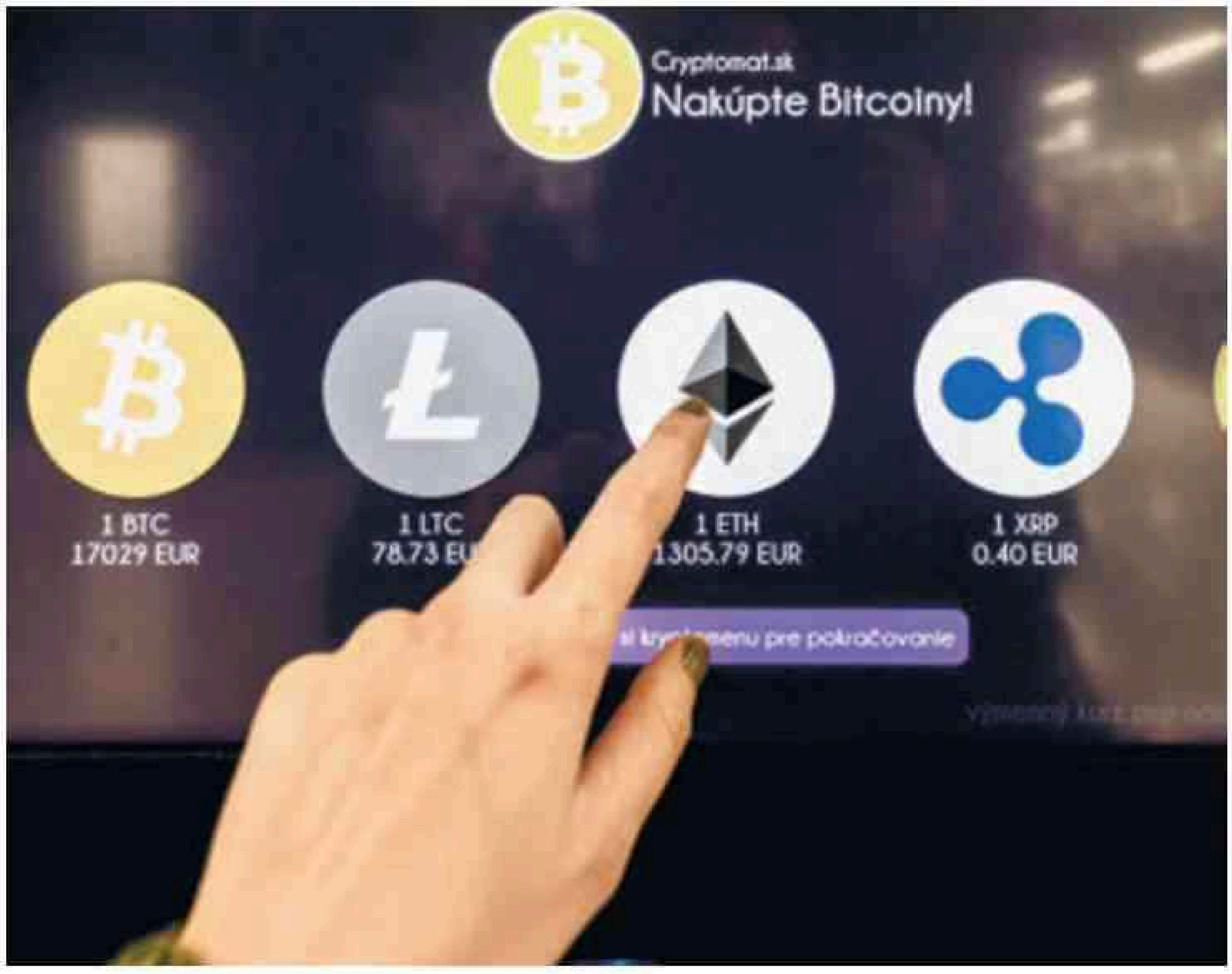
Thus, digital technology essentialism, as being projected now through a campaign blitzkrieg named "Digital India", is not always the best way to deliver public services. It requires, *a priori*, higher public investment in human resources, infrastructure, and education if the growing income inequality is to be bridged and the full, all-inclusive potential of digital tech is to be harnessed.

To conceptualise a world that is truly equal, digital transformation cannot be positioned as a universal "one size fits all" remedy for the country's problems without addressing the structural inequalities inherent (and now deeply accentuated under the impact of COVID-19) in our society.

It is far more important to address the structural malaise of inequality through public provisioning of rights based universal education, health, income, old age pension, and financial inclusion in a traditional way than to opt for digitalisation, pretending it is a magic bullet.

Digital transformation of society will become far easier in a society that is just and equal. This is equally true in the case of the digital rupee.☐

Rana Mitra is General Secretary, All India NABARD Employees Association.



BLOOMBERG

A CUSTOMER buys the ethereum cryptocurrency at a designated automated teller machine in Bratislava, Slovakia, on December 1, 2022.

The pain of being in chains

The amendments made to the Wildlife (Protection) Act largely mark a missed opportunity to phase out regressive practices such as keeping elephants in captivity. BY **RISHIKA PARDIKAR**

WITH THE PRESIDENT'S ASSENT, on December 19, the Bill to amend the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA), 1972, is now officially law. The Rajya Sabha passed it on December 8 and the Lok Sabha a year ago. Notification in the official gazette is all that remains.

The amendment is primarily aimed at revising four aspects of the law: allowing delegation of functions of the State Boards for Wildlife (SBWLs) to a select set of people ("standing committee") as is currently the case with the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL); a rework of the schedules that list species according to the levels of protection they need in view of the threats they face; providing for the implementation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); and an exception to the requirement to obtain permission from the Chief Wildlife Warden for the transfer and transport of captive elephants for religious or other purposes.

EXCEPTION PROVISION

During the debate in the Rajya Sabha, many members raised concerns about the exception provision, among them were members from the Congress, the Trinamool Congress, and the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party.

"What is 'any other purpose'?" Jairam Ramesh, Congress MP from Karnataka and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment and Forests, wanted to know. "To provide captive elephants for a zoo in Gujarat and private amusement parks in other States?" he asked. The reference was to a zoo that the Reliance Group is setting up in Jamnagar in Gujarat. In his reply, Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav referred to Section 38 of the WLPA, which deals with zoos.

In the last few months, a news portal of the north-eastern region has published reports claiming that wild elephants have been smuggled from Arunachal Pradesh and Assam to Gujarat. Another factor behind the exception clause could be religious festivals such as Pooram in Kerala. According to data animal rights groups obtained in 2020 under the Right to Information Act, Assam has the highest number of elephants in private custody followed by Kerala.

S.S. Bist, a former Director of the Central government's Project Elephant and a former Chief Wildlife Warden of West Bengal, told *Frontline* that in the past, captive elephants were largely used in north-eastern States for timber logging operations and defence purposes. In 1996, the Supreme Court imposed a ban on logging, and captive elephants in these States "became surplus", he said. "So they are now sent to States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, and Gujarat for temples, tourism, and weddings."

In fact, news reports from Kerala suggested that temples in the State celebrated the passage of the Bill in the Upper House. As for what Pooram means for the well-being of elephants, Alok Hisarwala, founder of the Centre for Research on Animal Rights, said "serious hardship". He explained that elephants were trained under difficult conditions for many weeks and shipped to cities and villages across Kerala during the festival. "I understand that we are a

> The National Board for Wildlife has not met even once since it was formed in 2014, and all of its powers have been usurped by a standing committee.

M.A. SRIRAM

THE DASARA ELEPHANT Lakshmi with her newborn calf on the palace premises in Mysuru on September 14, 2022.

religious country, but Pooram is a highly commercial activity and it brings in a lot of money for private elephant owners," Hisarwala said.

Ramesh also raised concerns about the move to establish standing committees at SBWLs, saying that this could turn them into "rubber stamp machines" for wildlife clearances and that they might not be able to function with either independence or environmental integrity.

In their submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment and Forests, the Legal Initiative for Forests and Environment (LIFE), an NGO that works on environmental laws and advocacy, said that the provision would render the State boards "defunct" as a handful of members could function "with no accountability to the [full] Board".

This is exactly what happened with the NBWL. It has not met even once since it was formed in 2014, and all of its powers have been usurped by a standing committee, which has cleared hundreds of hectares of protected areas for mining and infrastructure projects and the like. The Bombay Natural History Society too raised concerns about this provision in the Bill, stating: "Decisions should be taken by the entire State board for wildlife and not just a minimum number of members of the standing committee." As regards the amendments pertaining to CITES and the reworking of schedules, legal and wildlife experts largely view them as an improvement to the law. "Until now, CITES provisions were enforced through the Customs Act and not the Wildlife (Protection) Act, which was a major lacunae," said Ritwick Dutta, environmental lawyer and founder of LIFE.

"Most captive elephants in India are caught from the wild, and they are largely from Assam," said Debadityo Sinha, a senior resident fellow at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy headquartered in New Delhi. A 2010 report by the Union Environment Ministry, titled "Gaja: Securing the Future for Elephants in India", too noted: "The vast majority of captive elephants today were born in the wild and subsequently taken into captivity."

UNCLEAR OWNERSHIP

During the debate, Congress MP Vivek K. Tankha said: "There are 2,675 captive elephants in India and only 1,251 have ownership certificates." He noted that unclear ownership was an issue at present and the provisions that were "weak and indeterminate" would "cause problems". However, Pavitra Margherita, a BJP MP from Assam, supported the provision for enabling the smooth transfer of elephants between States.

Legal experts point out that even with the amendment, moving captive elephants from one State to another will still require permission from the Chief Wildlife Warden. Section 40 of the Act requires prior approval of the Chief Wildlife Warden in cases where a person comes into possession of captive animals. And so, while the exception has been carved out of Section 43, which deals with the regulation of animals, this clause still remains as it was. Section 39, too, requires prior permission for the transfer of animals. Sections 11 and 12 permit hunting in certain cases as when an animal has become particularly dangerous to human life or for larger conservation purposes such as scientific research and education. "Hunting" in the legislation includes capture for captivity. But religious purposes do not find mention here, which gives rise to confusion in implementation.

"There are many policy and implementation challenges with this amendment," Bist said. In addition to issues with interpretation of the exception clause, he explained that while the government could claim to frame rules to clarify what "other purposes" meant, the fact remains that rules can be framed and changed multiple times without parliamentary scrutiny. In 2009, the Central Zoo Authority banned elephants in zoo collections and directed that they be rehabilitated in protected areas such as national parks and sanctuaries. "This order has not been withdrawn. So the government should make up its mind: should we keep elephants in zoos and in captivity or not?" Bist said.

The amendment is a missed opportunity to phase out regressive practices such as keeping elephants in captivity. "Captivity means torture [during training] and a life of slavery. It should be banned. There should be no new recruitment of elephants into captivity," Dutta said, saying that snake charming and sacrificing owls during Diwali had been prohibited despite being linked to religious and cultural practices. □

Rishika Pardikar is a wildlife and climate change reporter based in Bengaluru.

Tense peninsula

The resumption of US-South Korea joint military exercises and North Korea's multiple missile tests in response have undone the gains of the past few years, when relative calm prevailed in the region. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

TENSIONS ARE RISING YET AGAIN IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA. The massive United States-South Korean joint military exercises have once again resumed. Meanwhile, North Korea has tested more than 80 ballistic and cruise missiles so far this year. In the third week of December, North Korea test-fired a rocket from its east coast. The country denied accusations by South Korea that it had tested another intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). In a statement it said that the firing of the rocket was part of its preparation to launch a military reconnaissance satellite by April.

The latest missile test happened immediately after North Korea's announcement that it had developed a new ICBM that would be hard to detect. North Korea claimed that the latest ICBM developed by its scientists is

NORTH KOREAN leader Kim Jong-un and his daughter walk away from an intercontinental ballistic missile in this undated photo released on November 19, 2022, by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency.

REUTERS

propelled by solid fuel. (The previous three ICBMs launched by it were liquid-fuelled.) Missiles using solid fuel are easier to hide and transport. The test coincidentally took place after the Japanese government announced that it was doubling its defence budget, citing growing threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. In recent times, North Korea also fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile over northern Japan and launched a further 23 missiles, one of which crossed the maritime border with South Korea.

This year's joint US-South Korean military exercises were the biggest in the Korean peninsula in decades. South Korea also test-fired its own missiles into the disputed maritime demarcation line between the two Koreas, to which North Korea responded by firing short-range missiles that landed in waters 60 kilometres from the South Korean city of Sokcho. North Korea said that its recent missile tests were in response to the "aggressive and provocative" US-led military exercises in South Korea. It warned that the US and South Korea would "pay the most horrible price in history" if they continued to stage military exercises in the peninsula.

North Korea has accumulated a credible nuclear and missile arsenal over the last two decades. Last year, it test-launched a nuclear-capable long-range strategic cruise missile and has been testing submarine-launched ballistic missiles since 2015.

The country's leader, Kim Jong-un, was present along with his wife and daughter during the second ICBM test in November, the first time his daughter appeared in public. To Western commentators, it was a sign that she was next in line of succession. Japanese Defence Minister Yasukazu Hamada said that the latest North Korean ICBM had a range of over 15,000 km, which means it has the capacity to hit targets anywhere in the US. According to Western military analysts, the ICBM that North Korea tested in November was a Hwasong-17. The country first launched this class of missile two years ago.

KCNA, the North Korean news agency, claimed that the Hwasong-17 launch was aimed at achieving "the most powerful and absolute deterrence". Immediately after the ICBM launch, US F-16 and South Korean F-35 fighters flew in formation near the border in a show of strength.

US President Joe Biden discussed the situation during a four-hour meeting with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. Both China and Russia have not vetoed the tough sanctions imposed on North Korea by the UN Security Council since 2006.

The last Security Council resolution adopted in 2017 imposed the severest sanctions, almost completely isolating the country from the international community. China, which shares a long border with North Korea and is the country's most important trading partner, joined the rest of the international community in implementing those sanctions.

The international scenario has, however, changed a lot in the last couple of years. The US has now openly characterised China as its principal strategic competitor and is openly trying to build a military alliance against it. Russia is engaged in a de facto conflict with NATO in Ukraine, and Western governments have alleged that North Korea has been supplying weaponry to Russia after the conflict in Ukraine began. Both Russia and North Korea have denied the allegations. It is unlikely that China and Russia will henceforth support any Security Council resolution calling for additional sanctions on North Korea. The country's economy, ravaged by decades of sanctions, was further impacted by the pandemic in the last two years.

The latest flurry of North Korean missile tests came after the US, Japan, and South Korea announced in a joint statement their determination "to work together to strengthen deterrence" against North Korea. The leaders of the three countries made the statement after their meeting during the ASEAN meet in Phnom Penh in the third week of November. The three countries pledged "to share DPRK (North Korea) missile warning data in real time to improve each country's ability to detect and assess the threat posed by incoming missiles". They also claimed that the steps were being taken to protect "peace and stability" in the region. The statement issued in Phnom Penh came just a day after North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Sun-hui warned that his country's response would be "fiercer" if the three countries further enhanced their military cooperation.

While talking about peace and stability, Biden had reiterated the US commitment to defend Japan and South Korea. He said that the commitment was "ironclad and backed by the full range of capabilities, including nuclear". North Korea naturally interpreted this statement as a threat to its security.

RELATIONS BETWEEN KOREAS

Since taking office the Biden administration has not bothered to re-establish contact with the North Korean government. In South Korea, too, a new right-wing government, uninterested in detente with North Korea, is now in power. The previous President, Moon Jae-in, had briefly succeeded in getting North Korea to the negotiating table.

However, his successor, Yoon Suk-yeol, has very hawkish views on relations with the neighbour. He had campaigned on the promise that he would adopt a tough

> This year's joint US-South Korean military exercises were the biggest in the Korean peninsula in decades.

US AND SOUTH KOREAN fighter jets during a joint air drill over the South Korean peninsula on November 19, 2022.

AFP

approach while dealing with the North Korean government. Among the first decisions Yoon took was to "normalise" the joint US-Korea exercises and "step up" joint military training to deter North Korea from testing more missiles and nuclear weapons.

One of the reasons why there was comparative calm in the Korean peninsula in the last couple of years was the Donald Trump administration's decision to temporarily halt US-South Korean military exercises in the peninsula. The decision was taken in close coordination with the previous South Korean government just before three highly publicised meetings between Trump and Kim Jong-un in 2018 and in 2019. North Korea responded by suspending its missile testing for more than two years after talks with Trump began. The hope in the US and South Korea was that the move would nudge North Korea to negotiate seriously on the issue of nuclear and missile disarmament.

However, North Korea sought more concrete measures, including the lifting of sanctions and the signing of a peace treaty with the US that would formally end the Korean War.

There is only an armistice agreement that was signed by the UN, China, and North Korea at the end of the Korean War in 1953. A formal peace agreement with the US been a long-standing demand of the North Korean government. Talks with the Trump administration collapsed by the end of 2019 after the US refused to concede North Korea's major demands.

BIDEN APPROACH

The Biden administration announced in early 2022 that it would take "a calibrated, practical approach" to deal with North Korea. After completing 100 days in office, Biden told the US Congress that issues relating to North Korea would be addressed through "diplomacy and strong deterrence". The Biden administration had stated in April 2021 that its policy on North Korea "would not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience".

After the first meeting between the newly elected Biden and the South Korean president in May 2021, the two countries expressed support for the Panmunjom Declaration that was issued after the first inter-Korean summit in 2018. The Panmunjom Declaration talks about the shared goals of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and increasing inter-Korean cooperation.

But there are no signs that the Biden administration will abandon its "management through deterrence" policy any time soon. The US, keeping in view the strategic rivalry with China, apparently is of the view that maintaining and further strengthening the strong political and military relationship with South Korea is a more important priority than pursuing the goal of denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

In the last six months, the US has persuaded South Korea to sink its differences with Tokyo and forge a stronger tripartite military alliance in the region. Biden administration officials have also been talking about incorporating South Korea into the Quad security alliance. The other members of the anti-China grouping are India, Australia, and Japan.

The US has a permanent military presence in South Korea. It has maintained some 30,000 troops in the country since the end of the Korean War in 1953. US missile systems, including the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense batteries are deployed in the country.

Kim Jong-un recently repeated his pledge to "fight nukes with nukes" and engage in "total confrontation" if the US, South Korea, and Japan continue to threaten it.

In a speech to the Supreme People's Assembly in September, he declared that the country would not give up its nuclear weapons as long as nuclear weapons and "imperialism" continued to exist. "We have drawn the line of no retreat regarding our nuclear weapons, so that there will no longer be any bargaining over them," he said.

There have been reports that Pyongyang is getting ready for another nuclear test. The last one it conducted was in 2017, when it detonated a powerful thermonuclear bomb.

The UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has said that the country is ramping up production of plutonium and highly enriched uranium in order to bolster its arsenal of nuclear weapons. ☐

Targeting temples

The Tamil Hindu community in Sri Lanka **seeks India's support** to protect its sacred sites and temples, which are under attack by the establishment's deliberate policy of cultural sanitisation. BY **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

KANNIYA HOT SPRINGS, A SET OF WELLS about 10 kilometres from Trincomalee town along the A-12 highway, is a sacred spot for Hindus in Sri Lanka. But the Sri Lankan Army's ubiquitous presence in Tamil areas extends to this site as well.

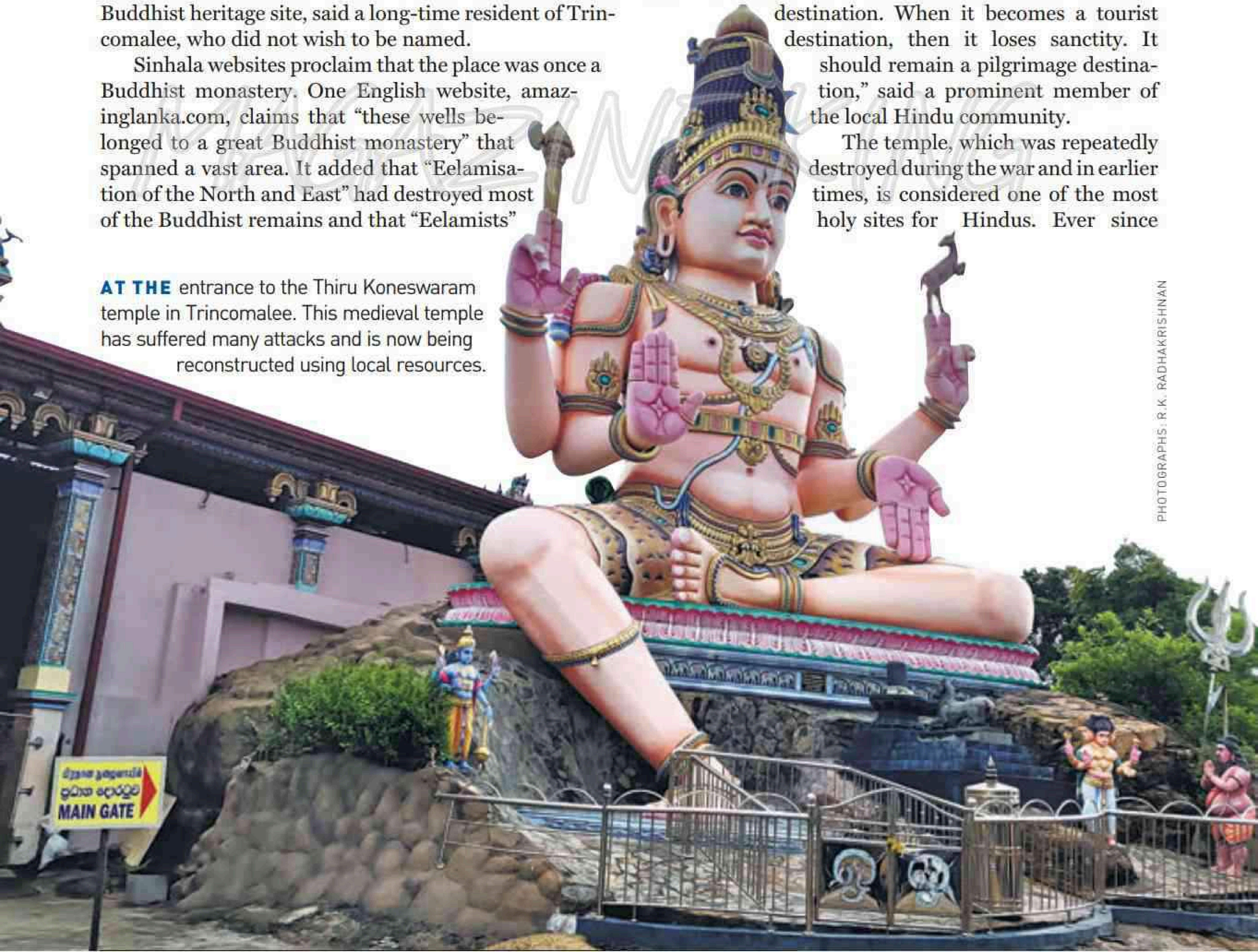
A Buddha statue, built after the Sri Lankan Army won the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, can be seen a short distance away from the well. Aided by the Sri Lankan archaeological department, efforts are on to convert the area into a Buddhist heritage site, said a long-time resident of Trincomalee, who did not wish to be named.

Sinhala websites proclaim that the place was once a Buddhist monastery. One English website, amazinglanka.com, claims that "these wells belonged to a great Buddhist monastery" that spanned a vast area. It added that "Eelamisation of the North and East" had destroyed most of the Buddhist remains and that "Eelamists" had been "erasing all signs" of an ancient Buddhist civilisation in these areas for the last 30-40 years.

THIRU KONESWARAM

A short distance away, the Thiru Koneswaram temple, located on Swami Rock, and accessed through the Sri Lankan Army-controlled Fort Fredrick, has a different but easily relatable problem. "Thiru Koneswaram is a place of worship for Hindus. We want that place to be holy and [it] should not be converted into a tourist destination. When it becomes a tourist destination, then it loses sanctity. It should remain a pilgrimage destination," said a prominent member of the local Hindu community.

The temple, which was repeatedly destroyed during the war and in earlier times, is considered one of the most holy sites for Hindus. Ever since



AT THE entrance to the Thiru Koneswaram temple in Trincomalee. This medieval temple has suffered many attacks and is now being reconstructed using local resources.

PHOTOGRAPHS: R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN

the civil war ended, believers have contributed to the construction of a makeshift structure that now houses the temple. The local residents want the Indian government's help to build a path around the temple so that some of the rituals can be performed. As of now, even local efforts are thwarted by the archaeological department, which claims that tampering with the hilltop, where the temple is located, is not desirable.

In fact, when the High Commissioner of India visited the temple on October 2, the temple trust president Thusyanthan briefed him on the temple's history and submitted a proposal for its restoration as a pilgrimage destination for devotees from near and far.

THE WAR YEARS

It is impossible to estimate the number of Hindu temples destroyed during the war years because the state had no control over the Tamil regions for decades until the war ended in 2009.

A July 6, 2010, report in *Hindustan Times* quoted Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader S. Yogeswaran as saying in Parliament that 500 Hindu temples in the North and the East were damaged during the military operations. However, in 2014, an organisation sympathetic to the LTTE, in response to a query, said in an email to this correspondent that 1,342 temples had been destroyed. (The LTTE ran the government in large parts of the North and the East until 2009). In all, the mail claimed, 2,076 temples were destroyed. This is also the number tweeted by an account named Subcontinent (@subcontinent_) in November 2020, quoting Tamil scholar M. Neiminathan and the Federation of Saiva (Hindu) Temples.

According to 1993 statistics available with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs, there were 1,607 registered temples, of which 1,479 were damaged.

In 2011, India signed an agreement to provide 32.6 crore Lankan rupees to restore the Thiruketheeswaram Siva temple, one of the five sacred Ishwarams dedicated to Siva, located in the north-eastern district of Mannar. Restoration work commenced in 2012.

CULTURAL SANITISATION

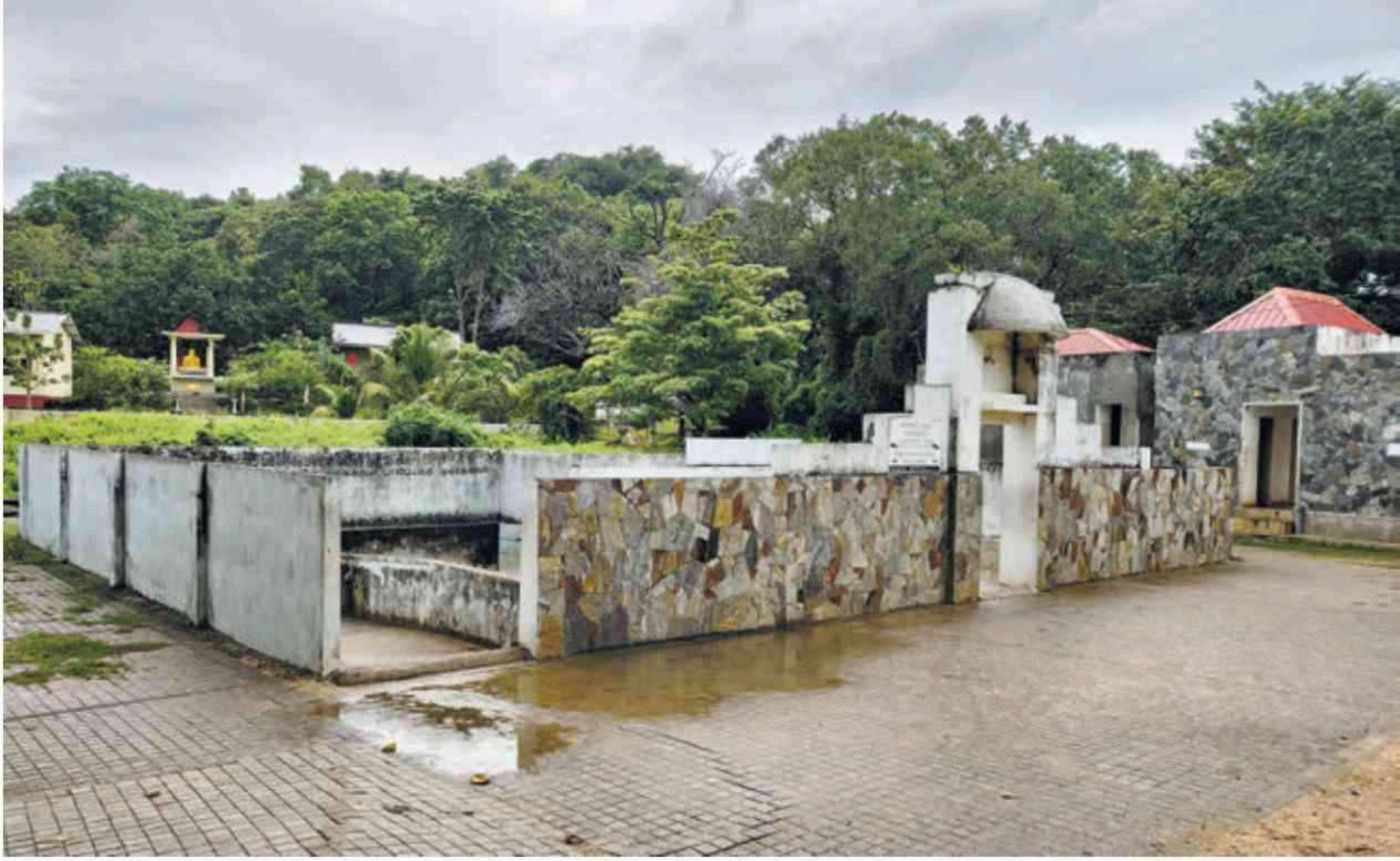
The problem goes much beyond the destruction of temples sacred to Tamils, who are a minority in the country but in a majority in several villages in the North and the East. In hundreds of villages where Tamils are in a majority, the Army, along with the Sinhala-Buddhist establishment, has been changing the landscape by establishing more Buddhist temples and Buddhist statues, taking over land in the name of setting up camps and accommodation for the armed forces, and resettling Sinhalas in these areas. There is a deliberate policy of Sinhalisation aimed at erasing the cultural and linguistic identity of Tamil-dominant areas.

> Planting of cultural symbols and the land grab did not abate even when the country seemed to be headed towards chaos this year.

TNA leader R. Sampanthan, who is also the MP from Trincomalee, said: "It is not merely a Tamil question. It is a Hindu question.... The Sinhala population [in the North and the East] is being increased through resettlement.... The Tamil people have become victims again. They are leaving the country. If this goes on, the people will be unable to maintain their identity in this country. The international community should not permit that. The idea is to make the demand for a federal set-up in the north and the east unnecessary or unable to achieve by settlements." Sri Lankan Tamils in the North and the East hope that India will intervene and stop the destruction of Hindu religious sites and help in the rebuilding of several temples, which were destroyed or damaged during the war years or earlier.

On the question of land grab, Jaffna Member of Parliament and TNA's prominent face, M.A. Sumanthiran, said that the issue deserved "immediate attention". In a report in *The Sunday Morning*, published on November 27, 2022, he was quoted as saying: "That is primary because it's happening at the moment. It is actively happening in various places and we have high-

THIS LARGE TRACT OF LAND, near the Paranthan-Mullaitivu A35 highway, photographed in May 2019, was fenced off by the Sri Lankan military after the war ended in 2009. The government has been taking over such large tracts from where Tamils fled during the war and refuses to give them back to the rightful owners.



THE KANNIYA hot springs, which were managed by the nearby Hindu temple for a long time. After the war ended in 2009, the Sri Lankan military took over the site, installed a Buddha statue, and claimed that it was a Buddhist site.

lighted it. We have brought it to the attention of this President, the former President, but it still goes on unabated. This is crucial, it must be halted and then reversed."

Even as the Tamils are fighting to regain their land and their public spaces, the government in Colombo has issued fresh orders sanctioning further takeover of land. A September 23, 2022, circular of the Ministry of Tourism and Lands has decided to go ahead with taking over 1,614.11 acres in Jaffna for establishing a "high security zone".

Sumanthiran said that these lands had been occupied since the 1990s, adding that even when original owners stake their claim they were not even accorded a hearing. Along with the takeover of lands, Buddha *viharas* and statues have been built all along the stretch.

On one occasion, Sumanthiran even raised in Parliament the issue of the contents of a confidential document, signed by a Sri Lankan Minister, to bifurcate the linguistic contiguity of the North and the East by altering the ethnic composition of Mullaitivu south and Trincomalee north.

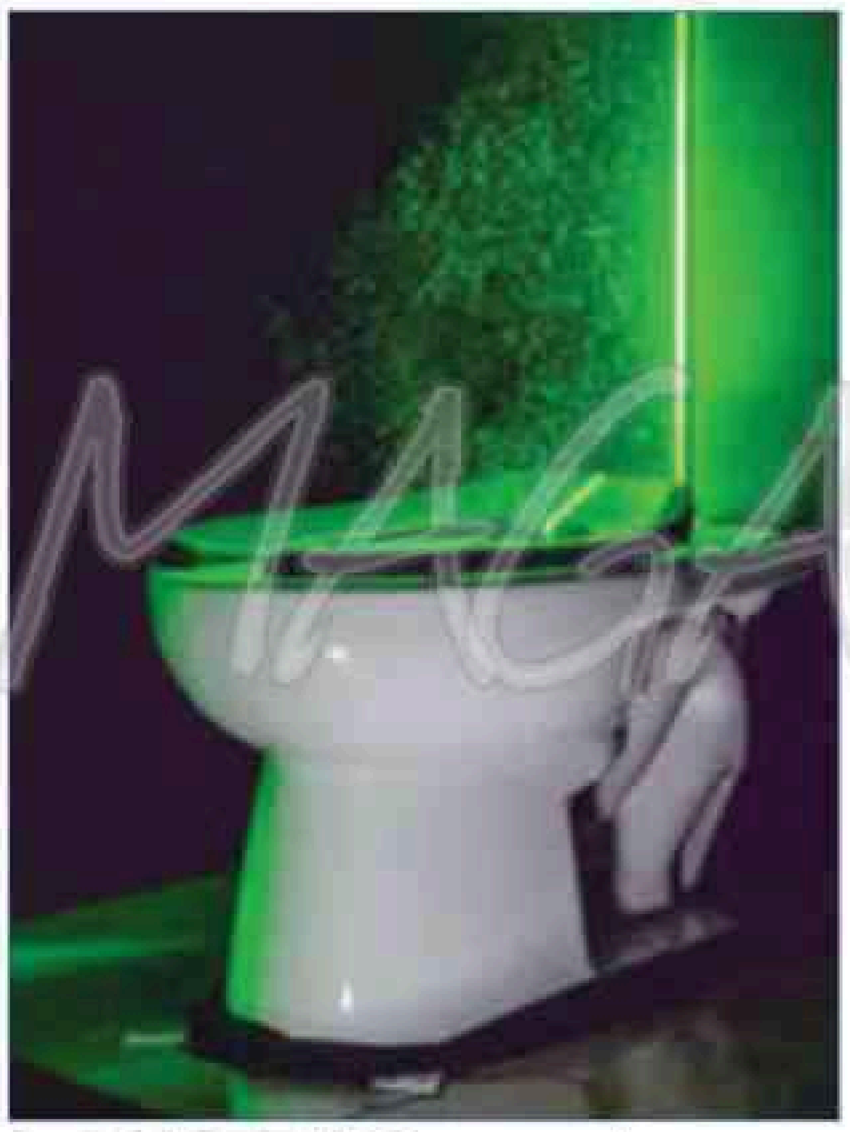
In a letter to the then President in June 2020, he raised this very issue: "The breaking up of the Tamil linguistic continuity between the eastern and the northern provinces has been an objective of the majoritarian political leadership for a long time.... Land was alienated to persons from the majority community from outside the north-east on the boundary of the north-east, in an area called 'Malal Aru' or 'Welioya' and institutional arrangements set up to facilitate this program. These efforts are a continuing process. The bifurcation of Tamil linguistic continuity in the north-east could not succeed due to the existence of traditional Tamil villages which had been historically inhabited by the Tamil people."

Representatives of Tamil political parties, other than those aligned with the government, have alleged that the steps to bring in cultural symbols from the south, as well as the land grab, had not abated even during the tumultuous months early this year when it appeared that Sri Lanka was headed towards chaos. They hope that India will intervene to help re-establish the places of worship because most of these temples are holy to all Hindus, not just for those in Sri Lanka. □

Toilet flush can be a health risk

RESEARCHERS have known for over 60 years that when a toilet is flushed, solids and liquids go down as designed, but tiny particles, invisible to the eye, are also released into the air. Studies have detected the presence of aerosolised particles above flushed toilets and shown that larger ones can land on surrounding surfaces, but until now, no one knew what these plumes looked like or how the particles got there.

Now, using bright green lasers and camera equipment, a team of engineers at the University of Colorado, Boulder, US, have demonstrated what happens when a lid-less, public restroom toilet is flushed. This study, the first to directly visualise the resulting aerosol plume and measure the speed and spread of particles ejected, was published in *Scientific Reports*.


PATRICK CAMPBELL/CU BOULDER

A POWERFUL green laser helps visualise aerosol plumes from a flushed toilet.

It found that particles shoot out quickly, at speeds of 2 m/s, reaching 1.5 m above the toilet within 8 seconds. While the largest droplets tend to settle onto surfaces within seconds, the smaller particles (less than 5 microns) can remain suspended in the air for minutes or longer. These aerosolised particles are known to transport pathogens and pose an exposure risk to users of public bathrooms. However, this experimental demonstration could also enable the development of ways to reduce the potential exposure to disease, such as disinfection and ventilation strategies or improved toilet and flush design.

"If it's something you can't see, it's easy to pretend it doesn't exist. But once you see these videos, you're never going to think about a toilet flush the same way again," said John Crimaldi, lead author of the study. Studies have shown that pathogens can persist in the bowl for dozens of flushes, increasing potential exposure risk. "The goal of the toilet is to effectively remove waste from the bowl, but it's also doing the opposite, which is spraying a lot of contents upwards," said Crimaldi.

The researchers used two lasers: one shone continuously on and above the toilet, while the other sent out fast pulses of light over the same area. The constant laser revealed where in space the airborne particles were, while the pulsing laser measured their speed and direction. Two cameras took high-resolution images.

The toilet used for the experiment was a lid-less unit accompanied by a cylindrical flushing mechanism that sticks up from the back near the wall.

"We had expected these aerosol particles would just sort of float up, but they came out like a rocket," said Crimaldi. The plume also rose to the laboratory's ceiling and moved outwards from the wall and spread into the room.

The researchers also measured the airborne particles with an optical particle counter. Smaller particles were found to not only float in the air for longer but were also able to escape nose hairs and reach deeper into the lungs. The experimental setup did not include any solid waste or toilet paper in the bowl, and there were no stalls or people moving around. These real-life situations could exacerbate the risk, said Crimaldi.

Rocky fireball from the icy regions of space

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, CANADA

THE FIREBALL captured by the Global Fireball Observatory camera over Alberta.

IN 2021, an international team of professional and amateur astronomers, led by planet scientists of Western University in Ontario, Canada, captured images and videos of a meteoroid that exploded over central Alberta as a dazzling fireball. The scientists have now determined that it originated from the edge of the solar system and was rocky in composition. This is an extraordinary finding because scientists thought only icy bodies existed beyond the solar system.

From the fireball data, researchers determined that the meteoroid broke apart like a rocky object, with pieces surviving deeper in the earth's atmosphere than icy objects would do. The analysis also suggested that it lay in the middle of the Oort Cloud, the giant shell of billion to trillion icy bodies that is believed to encircle the solar system far beyond Pluto. Passing stars sometimes nudge these icy bodies towards the sun, and these are comets with long tails. No object in the Oort Cloud has been observed directly, but everything coming from that direction has been found to be made of ice. According to the present theoretical understanding of the solar system's beginnings, only icy objects exist in these outer reaches, so discovering a rocky body from this region does not gel with the existing theories of solar system formation. The puzzling findings were published in *Nature Astronomy*.

"This discovery supports an entirely different model of the formation of the Solar System... that significant amounts of rocky material coexist with icy objects within the Oort cloud," said Denis Vida, a Western meteor physicist. "This result is not explained by the currently favoured Solar System formation models. It's a complete game changer." All previous rocky fireballs arrived from much closer to the earth. Cameras of the state-of-the-art Global Fireball Observatory (GFO), developed in Australia and run by the University of Alberta, observed the grapefruit-sized (approximately 2 kg) rocky meteoroid. Using Global Meteor Network tools, the Western researchers calculated that it was travelling on an orbit usually associated with icy long-period comets from the Oort Cloud.

"In 70 years of regular fireball observations, this is one of the most peculiar ever recorded. It validates the strategy of the GFO established five years ago, which widened the 'fishing net' to 5 million km^2 of skies and brought together scientific experts from around the globe," said Hadrien Devillepoix of Curtin University, Australia, and the principal investigator of the GFO.

"We want to explain how this rocky meteoroid ended up so far away because we want to understand our own origins. The better we understand the conditions in which the Solar System was formed, the better we understand what was necessary to spark life," said Vida.

Wet surface can **increase friction!**

WHILE, in general, wetting a floor reduces friction and increases the risk of slipping, there are cases where adding water to a surface increases friction, such as when licking one's fingers to turn a book page.

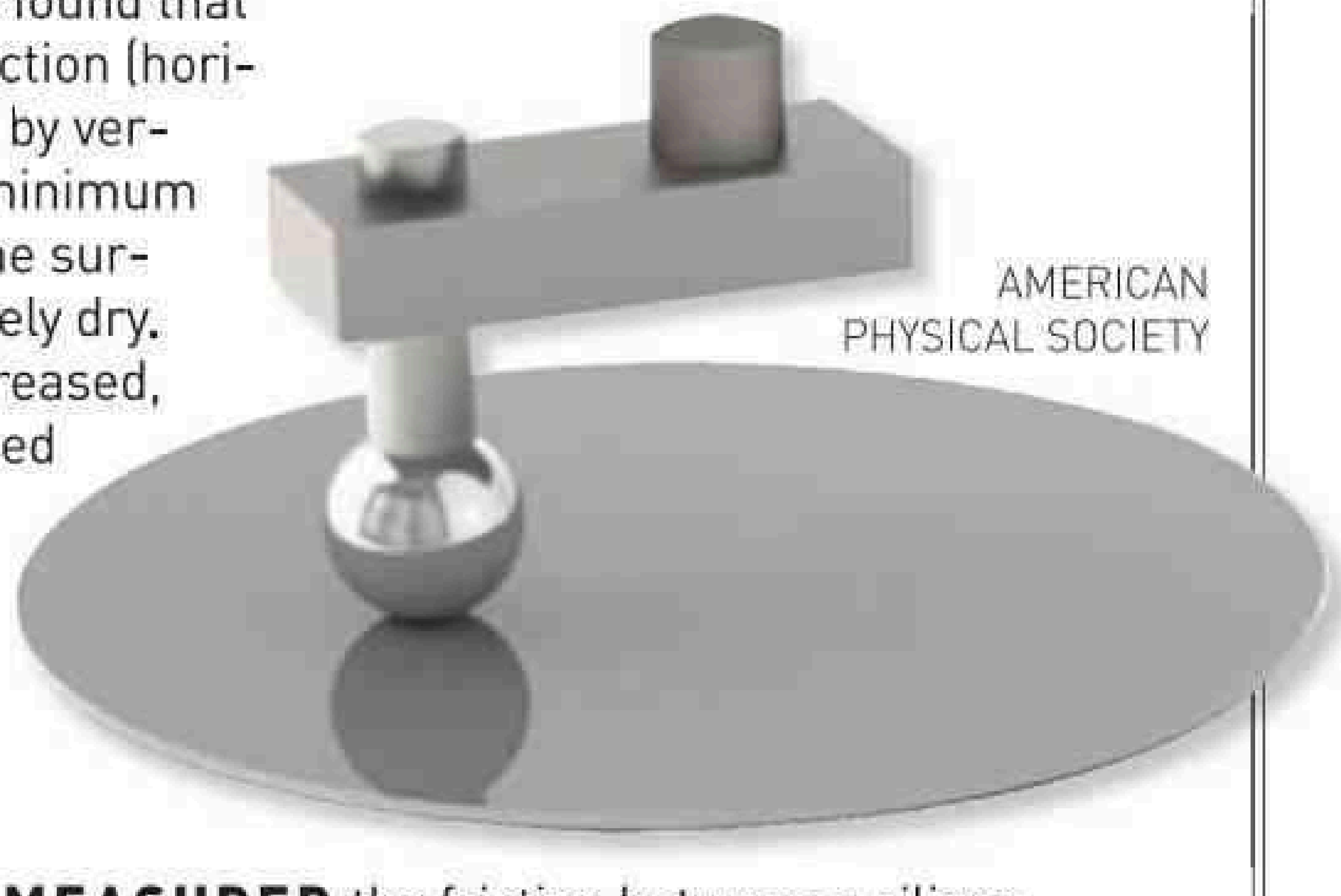
The earliest friction studies had considered relatively large objects, such as a block of wood sliding down an inclined surface. More recent experiments have focussed on the nanoscale. These have studied frictional forces on needle-like probes and identified mechanisms operating at a single microscopic bump, or "asperity", on a surface. But, said the physicist Liang Peng of the University of Amsterdam, the question how the frictional forces at the two scales, nano and macro, were related had remained unanswered.

Peng's team took a 3-mm-wide silicon sphere and pressed it down on a flat silicon wafer with a "normal force" of 50 millinewtons. This resulted in a 20-micrometre-wide contact area consisting of several asperities. The researchers then measured the horizontal force needed to move the sphere across the wafer at 100 nanometres/s. The relative humidity was varied from 0.6 per cent, where the surfaces remained dry, to 80 per cent, where water was present but not completely coating the surfaces. They also tested with the surfaces fully immersed in water.

The researchers found that the coefficient of friction (horizontal force divided by vertical force) had its minimum value of 0.3 when the surfaces were completely dry. As the humidity increased, the coefficient peaked at 0.6 when the humidity was 20 per cent and then slowly decreased as the air became more humid. For the fully immersed case, the coefficient was around 0.5; completely wet surfaces were nearly twice as sticky as the completely dry ones.

The researchers first tried to understand this behaviour by considering capillary adhesion, a phenomenon well known from single-asperity studies. In a humid environment, water vapour can condense on the asperity to form a "water bridge" that connects to another asperity on a nearby surface. The bridge resists any motion (such as sliding) that pulls the asperities apart. For the team's multiasperity system, a multibridge model reproduced the friction peak at around 20 per cent humidity. But, it could not explain the observation with surfaces fully immersed, where the friction was more than in the dry situation. There are no bridges in both the extreme cases.

To explain the mystery, the researchers proposed hydrogen bonding: the weak electrostatic attraction that can form between the water molecules and the silicon surfaces. To test this explanation, the team repeated the experiments with heavy water. Since heavy water has stronger hydrogen bonding, it produced a higher coefficient of friction (0.58) than normal water (0.51) in the fully immersed trials. The results of the work were published in a recent issue of *Physical Review Letters*.



AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY

EXPERIMENTS MEASURED the friction between a silicon sphere and a silicon wafer as humidity was varied.

Compiled by **R. Ramachandran**

Gone groves

A Bombay High Court order that gives the go-ahead to the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project seals the fate of thousands of mangroves. The rail company has undertaken to plant 1,10,000 saplings.

BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

ON DECEMBER 9, THE MUMBAI-Ahmedabad bullet train, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pet project, received a boost with an order from the Bombay High Court. The then Chief Justice, Dipankar Datta, and Justice Abhay Ahuja said that 21,997 mangrove trees could be cut to facilitate construction of the rail line for the train by the National High Speed Rail Corporation, a government entity under the Ministry of Railways with the governments of Gujarat and Maharashtra as partners. Initially, the rail company wanted to cut down 53,000 trees.

THE RESPONDENTS

The rail corporation was jubilant that its plea to cut the mangroves was allowed. Once the railway line is ready, the travel time for the 508.17 km distance between Mumbai and Ahmedabad will drop from six and a half hours to two and a half hours. The train will run at 350 km per hour. (The fastest train in the country at present runs at 180 kmph.)

The Maharashtra Coastal Zone

A VIEW OF the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary in New Mumbai, which lies in the path of the to-be-constructed line.

Management Authority (MCZMA) had refused permission for the project on mangrove land within the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) 1. In 2020, the National High Speed Railway Corporation filed a writ petition in the High Court seeking to quash this order. The State of Maharashtra, the MCZMA, the Mangrove Cell of the State Forest Department, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), and the Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG) were made respondents in the case.

THE BEAG'S STAND

The case has been going on for some years, but at various stages all the respondents except one granted their approvals to the rail corporation on the grounds that it had complied with their requirements. Only the BEAG continued to point out infringements with regard to the mangroves it said were being cut without authorisation.

The BEAG, represented by senior counsel Darius Khambata, had opposed the rail company's petition, arguing that second stage green clearance had to be in place first, that is, preparation of a draft environment impact assessment report. The BEAG also argued that since the Supreme Court had stayed permission to cut mangroves in another case, the rail company's plea should be deferred until the court ruled in that case.

> The gist of the argument is that not cutting 31,003 trees makes it acceptable to cut 21,997.

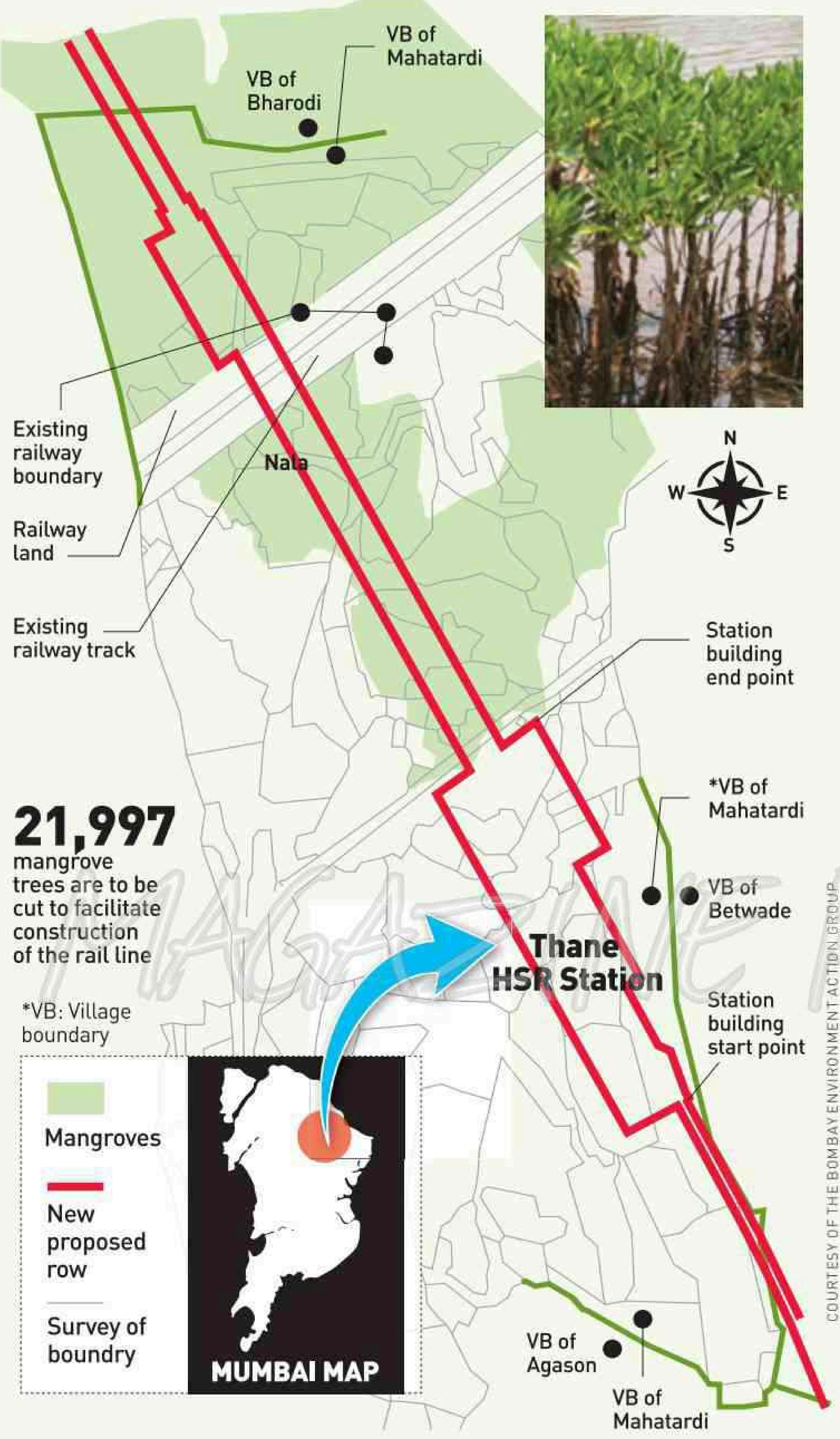
Defending its plea, the rail corporation said that the Union Environment Ministry had "imposed almost 40 conditions" some of which had to be complied with before seeking stage 2 clearance and others during the implementation stage of the project. It also submitted an affidavit saying that the Additional Chief Conservator of Forests in Maharashtra scrutinised the compliance requirements in May 2021 and then recommended stage 2 clearance. Bolstering its argument, the rail company said that in August 2022 the Union Ministry granted the final stage 2 approval for the project in the Mumbai Suburban, Thane, and Palghar districts subject to 36 more conditions.

While presenting its arguments in court on November 28, the BEAG said it believed that three conditions remained to be fulfilled, including the shifting of the Thane and Virar stations, but the rail company said the Thane station building had been completely shifted out of the mangrove area and the Virar station building was not situated in the reserved forest area. Khambata submitted that "the petitioner is seeking to read 'station' as applying only to the main station building and has ignored the station viaduct and viaduct bridge, which also form part of the station", but the court did not accept the argument.

Most importantly, the BEAG pointed out that there was no comprehensive mangrove conservation and management plan. This should have proved to be a stumbling point for the rail company since this is an essential requirement to get CRZ clearance. But the court was told that

PAUL NORONHA

THE THANE SECTION OF THE RAIL CORRIDOR


VB of Mahatardi
VB of Bharodi
Existing railway boundary
Railway land
Existing railway track
Nala
N
W
E
S
Station building end point
*VB of Mahatardi
VB of Betwade
Thane HSR Station
Station building start point
21,997 mangrove trees are to be cut to facilitate construction of the rail line
*VB: Village boundary
Mangroves
New proposed row
Survey of boundry
MUMBAI MAP
VB of Agason
VB of Mahatardi

COURTESY OF THE BOMBAY ENVIRONMENT ACTION GROUP

in 2019 the rail company asked the Mangrove Cell for just such a plan, which it was awaiting, and meanwhile, on September 26, 2019, it paid Rs.1.2 crore to the Mangrove and Marine Biodiversity Conservation Foundation of Maharashtra for another mitigation plan.

Responding to this, the order said: "We further note from the affidavits filed on behalf of the petitioner and the State that a comprehensive mangrove conservation management plan has already been put in place and that the petitioner has not only undertaken to plant 2,67,335 mangrove saplings but also deposited an amount of Rs.9.95 crores on 15th July 2022 as noted above."

Undaunted, the BEAG brought up the pending matter of the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary, which is in the path of the to-be-constructed line and requires a revised mitigation plan. This was met with the response that such a plan was submitted for review in August to the MoEFCC.

PUBLIC TRUST DOCTRINE

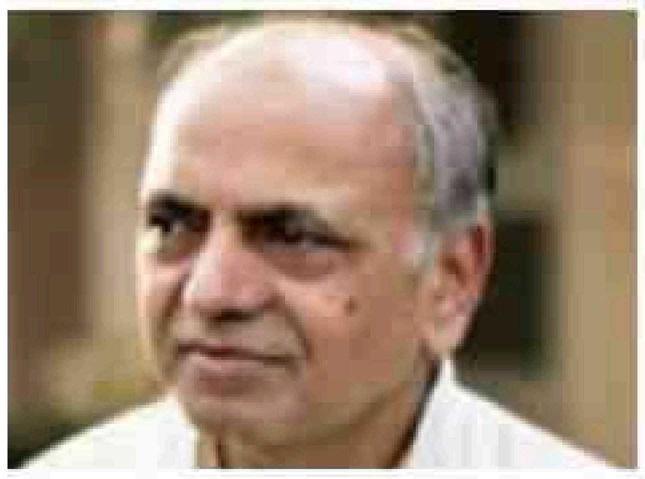
The court noted that the petitioner had agreed "to plant five times more the number of mangroves or as may be directed. He [Prahlad Paranjape, the rail corporation's advocate] submits that the petitioner is also ready to undertake any other environment conservation measures as would be required to be undertaken by it." Paranjape also "urged this Court to apply the public trust doctrine submitting that the project is not only in public interest but also for public good", which it did. The order read: "... in our view, considering the advantages set out above, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail Project is in public interest and necessary for public good and a project of bona fide public utility."

Paranjape said that after complying with all demands "the affected mangrove area for the project has been reduced from over 13 hectares to around 9, and the trees to be hit have come down to 21,997". The gist of the argument is that not cutting 31,003 trees makes it acceptable to cut 21,997. The court's direction to the rail corporation to "undertake compensatory plantation of 1,10,000 mangrove saplings" will also apparently compensate for the destruction of 21,997 full-grown mangrove trees.

The order said compensatory planting of mangroves "would strike a balance between development and protection and conservation of environment", but no study was undertaken about the likely survival rate of these saplings. As sadly happens in matters relating to the environment, the balance always seems to be tilted by the "larger public good" argument. This is a phrase that seriously needs a relook as, obviously, what is good for the environment is good for the public. ☐

COLUMN

INDIA, THIS SIDE



GANESH DEVY

Small-print India

The country's passion for democracy is explicit in its "small-print" publications brought out by local communities in villages and towns.

THULASI KAKKAT

PEOPLE READING newspapers at a public library in Kochi. A file picture.

WHEN I met the literary legend Mahasweta Devi, she was 70-plus years. She had won the Magsaysay Award, the Jnanpith Award, and the Padma Shri, and English translations of her works were being taught in universities in many countries. I was told that she had even been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Before meeting her, I had imagined that most of our time together would be spent in discussing the great writers of the world. However, from the moment she arrived in Baroda, where I had invited her for a lecture, our conversation was about Adivasis, the nomadic communities, and anything else but literature. Soon we started working together on social causes, cases of atrocities, communal harmony, justice for the marginalised, folk culture, and folk performances.

All this work continued for over a decade until she found that her body refused to oblige her desire for more work. Through that decade of great friendship and closeness, one topic at the top of her concerns was a little magazine called *Bortika* that her father had founded. She had kept it alive and given it a unique personality. It used to publish ordinary people's writings in ordinary words. It could hardly be called a literary magazine. Neither its production nor its contents made it outstanding in any sense. Yet, for her *Bortika* remained a life-long mission. She changed jobs, houses, and her family attachments several times but not her deep involvement with *Bortika*.

Some two decades before I met Mahasweta Devi, I came in contact with the iconic Gujarati writer Suresh Joshi. Somewhat like Ezra Pound, he was a writers' writer, someone whom every contemporary writer wanted to emulate. He is not much known outside Gujarat, but I have no doubt in my mind that he was among the most powerful writers Gujarat has produced since independence. He was some 30 years older than me, but we struck a deep friendship from the moment we met in 1980. Soon, we decided to launch a translation journal. It was called *Setu*, a bridge bringing various languages together. It appeared in two languages, Gujarati and English, in turns. He died a few years after we launched the journal. About the same time, I had to go off to England on a fellowship. Therefore, Jyotirmaya Sharma, now a political thinker; Shirish Panchal, Gujarati critic; and Gulammohammed Shiekh, the well-known painter, handled *Setu* for a while. It then fell silent.

Suresh Joshi had in his literary career started several journals and also witnessed them coming to an end. He also inspired his great number of fans and friends to launch their own journals.

About a decade before I participated in editing *Setu*, I was at a university in south Maharashtra. A small group of friends there came up with the idea of launching a periodical. We had neither the funds nor the experience for setting up a periodical. But, we managed to handwrite our "literature" on drawing paper and put them up on a notice board in the university library. Another group in the city had started a rag-mag for poetry, mostly for printing our own poems. But the excitement was great and it became for us the "happening space".

When I began my work with Adivasis, I suggested to the Adivasi friends that they bring out their own publication. It was called *Dhol*; it became a great mobiliser for Adivasis in western India in several of their languages. Some years later, having tasted success, I initiated another little magazine called *Bol* for young children and that was an even greater success. All these journals, their makers and their sad or happy outcomes, lead me to think that the "small-print" India is very vast. I have noticed that in villages and small towns, quite unnoticed by the state surveillance, a phenomenally large number of small-circulation publications keep coming out. They do not reach the national libraries, have no concern for the mandatory nod from the Registrar of Newspapers and journals, do not expect any significant advertisement revenue, have no desire to go beyond a small circle of friendly readers, and have no ambition for recognition.

The number of such publications in all languages of India, whether they are scheduled or non-scheduled languages, is absolutely phenomenal. Add to these, the bulletins that various associations and organisations bring out, which are slightly more formal, and the books and booklets brought out by hundreds of faceless small publications and sold on footpaths on the more informal side. Add also the more important expanse of digital journals, periodicals, and small group-circulation publications that are made possible due to people's access to digital technology. All of these, together, I would like to describe as "small-print India".

UNTAMED BY CORPORATES

One need not take the term "print" in its literal sense. After all, "small-print" as a phrase does say something very important. When a big and tempting advertisement appears on the TV screen, invariably, in the smallest possible fonts, also appears the caution "Conditions apply". The reality of the advertisement lies, as we all know, more in the small print rather than in the bold glossy visuals in which the advertisement maker wants your mind captivated. The "small-print" India is still not bound like the mythical Prometheus by big corporate houses as they have bound the "mainstream" media.

For the state, the small-print India is mostly a stranger, deserving to be ignored or seen as ignorant. After moving into Karnataka, I once tried to convene a meeting of persons who bring out "small-print" journals, bulletins, newspapers, and occasional publications. This was through an open call and the time given for responding was really very short. Yet, hundreds of them turned up for the meeting. If one were to attempt making a comprehensive list of all such ventures, in print and in digital media, for all languages of India, the numbers are likely to be in a few millions and their total audience in many crores. It is a fact of India's politics today that the ruling classes have brought the more visible media to a standstill, turning them into a wall between the reality of things and the people.

Media, which at one time were expected to be a bridge between individuals and the rest of the world, are sadly under immense pressure to divert people's minds from what they really need to know. We often tend to think that if people get to know the reality that they need to know, it is only because of access to social media. However, that view needs a small correction. The role of the small-print media in this cannot be overlooked. The availability of digital technology has made them more efficient than before. Yet, even when the technology is sought to be tamed by bringing it under the stranglehold of an oppressive law, the small-print India cannot be entirely intimidated. They will continue to do what they have done through the colonial rule and later during the Emergency.

During the Emergency, Gopal Krishna Adiga, a gifted Kannada poet, published a rather comical poem titled "dant-katha" which normally should mean a myth but can also mean, in its literal sense, "story of a toothache", as "dant" means "tooth or teeth" in many Indian languages. It spread throughout small-print India in most languages, generating the most hilarious jokes about the Emergency and ample political anger. Going by its history and considering how intimately India's passion for democracy is explicit in small-print India, one should expect a most creative phase to unfold in the life of small-print India. Three cheers for the small world of the small-circulation efforts of the small-writers and editors of small-print India, for powers that be must know that conditions apply. ☐

Ganesh Devy is a cultural activist and founder of Dakshinayana.

CULTURE

Biennale blues

The postponement of the Kochi Muziris Biennale exposes the fault lines on the organisational side, the most important of which is the lack of a permanent venue even 10 years after it first opened.

BY **NIDHEESH M.K.** AND **FRONTLINE BUREAU**

R.K. NITHIN

CHIEF MINISTER Pinarayi Vijayan inaugurating the fifth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale on December 12.

IN WHAT CAUSED considerable consternation in art circles, the Kochi Muziris Biennale, one of India's biggest and most prestigious art events, had a delayed start to its 2022 edition, which was postponed by 11 days. There was an official inauguration on December 12, but the leading venues were not opened to the public.

"Due to a variety of organisational challenges, compounded by external factors, the main Kochi-Muziris Biennale venues, including Aspinwall House, Anand Warehouse, and Pepper House will open to the public only on 23 December 2022," a statement issued just hours before the inauguration said. "We are all working hard towards this new date," it added.

More than the rescheduling, what triggered criticism was that it was announced at the very last minute, on the scheduled day of opening. This meant a wasted journey for the many artists, audiences, journalists, and tourists who had already reached Kochi. The fact that satellite exhibitions in the other venues, which included a collection of artwork from Kerala-based artists and the students' biennale, were ready for viewing did not quite fill the void left by the absence of the main shows.

Since its inception in 2012, KMB has not had all shows ready in time for the opening. There has always been a work-in-progress air that KMB proudly owned and, in fact, even fetishised to some extent. The absence of a rigid punctiliousness lent KMB a certain bohemian dash. Its venues are not the sterile places of biennales abroad. One navigates grazing goats to get to some and *kutcha* tracks to get to others. With godowns and abandoned warehouses converted to galleries, KMB has always carried off its tousled look rather well and acquired global fame.

This year's fiasco, however, is much more serious. It has hit artists, art lovers, tourists, and volunteers quite hard. Given how important an intervention KMB is in the calendar of Indian art, its organisers will have to work extra hard to ensure that the lapse does not cause lasting reputational damage. If, as many current and previous stakeholders hinted to *Frontline*, the process has become unwieldy or inefficient, it is time the organisers began to streamline it. It might become harder to bring on board international curators, something KMB appears committed to, without displaying more rigour.

So just what went wrong? *Frontline* spoke to some of the stakeholders to find out.

From 2012, KMB has been requesting the Kerala government for a permanent venue. Of its 14 venues, the two leading ones—Aspinwall House and Cabral Yard—have posed problems this year. The government owns 1.29 acres of Aspinwall House, but the remaining portions of these two venues are owned by the real estate company DLF. Both places had been made available generously for earlier editions for a deposit of about Rs.10 lakh. In 2016, the government initiated the process of acquiring these two venues permanently, but successive delays resulted in the agreements lapsing in 2019. Then the pandemic struck.

The purchase negotiations were restarted this year. By now, the DLF management had changed, and suddenly, the company upped the ante. It now demanded Rs.85 crore for the two sites, which together stand on 3.7 acres of land. The government was agreeable only to Rs.65 crore. Negotiations stalled.

"We started the conversation from July onwards," said Bose Krishnamachari, co-founder and president of the KMB Foundation. "Usually the curator and the artists begin site visits at least five months ahead."

CHIEF MINISTER'S INTERVENTION

When discussions reached an impasse, the KMB management appealed to the government and an intervention by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan appears to have worked. Vijayan chose K.S. Srinivas, Principal Secretary, Tourism Department, to continue the negotiations with DLF. Meetings were held in quick succession, and roughly five weeks before the opening, the tourism department and DLF officials appeared to have reached an agreement.

Aspinwall House was opened up to the biennale staff to begin work. "We got into Aspinwall House only on November 4," said Krishnamachari. The venue was in a shambles. Major maintenance work was needed to prepare it for the opening, and they had only weeks. "But we were optimistic," the artist said.

After a week spent racing against time, another twist emerged. DLF declared that the draft of the sale MoU mentioned a timeline of two years, whereas the company wanted the sale to go through in six months. Aspinwall House and Cabral Yard were again closed, and the biennale staff denied access. After many pleas and fresh negotiations, DLF opened up the two venues on December 1 and December 4 respectively, for a lease amount of Rs.21 lakh a month.

Krishnamachari sounds unfazed, but the experience must have been traumatic. "The Kerala government is pretty transparent," he said gamely, "but bureaucratic procedures take a long time and not everyone is prepared to wait."

By this point, only a miracle could have saved the day and not even his persistent Pollyanna spirit could bring that about. KMB's cup of misery overflowed when cyclone Mandous hit Kochi, stopping what little progress could have been made. Ideally, the KMB Foundation should have taken stock much earlier and rescheduled well in time, but confidence in last-minute *jugaad* usually runs high in India and this time it ran aground.

The venues do not seem to have been the only headache. Post-pandemic inflation also hit KMB hard. "International shipping costs were 200-300 per cent higher," said Krishnamachari. Moreover, new regulations have made it mandatory that bank guarantees for Customs to clear shipments are routed through nationalised banks only. "It took 21 days to get three bank guarantees from SBI," said Krishnamachari, exasperation entering his voice for the first time. The remaining seven were routed through Bank of India and it took just one day, he said.

THULASI KAKKAT

WORK ON THE BIENNALE
Pavilion at Cabral Yard, adjacent to Aspinwall House, on December 12.

A LACK OF FOCUS

While the KMB Foundation's members attribute the fiasco chiefly to unavoidable circumstances, many voices hint at a lack of focus. KMB, they say, has been struggling with internal turmoil for a while now, which they attribute to the absence of an institutionalised structure. A top Indian artist associated with several biennales, including the previous one in Kochi, requesting anonymity, said: "I don't believe money is the issue. The institution's structure is more important. Administratively, there have been significant delays and a lack of direction."

Its loose organisational structure has, however, been considered one of KMB's strengths and was chosen deliberately by the original board of trustees to allow artistic individuality and creativity to flow unhindered

THULASI KAKKAT

WORKERS getting ready Aspinwall House at Fort Kochi on December 12.

by bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Another commentator, previously associated with KMB, said: "The mishap is symptomatic of a systemic failure. The event is run in an autocratic way. There is an absolute lack of democracy, and only a select few are privy to the decision-making process." This person reiterated that the biennale was losing focus, saying: "It has become for the 'art world' rather than for 'the world of arts'."

Claiming organisational lapses, the person said: "The biennale is a non-profit affair, funded by the government, so it should be run in a transparent manner and under public scrutiny. But today, most matters are opaque. The Aspinwall controversy is just the tip of the iceberg. The debate should be on the larger goals of the biennale and its change in philosophy."

One of the KMB trustees strongly refuted this. "Both the government and the private donors independently audit the accounts of the biennale," he said. "There is complete scrutiny."

According to him, when postponement became inevitable, a meeting was held with the participating artists to ask if the biennale should be opened partially, with only the Aspinwall House show deferred. The artists decided it would be unfair and opted for the full show to be postponed. "This is democratic process," he pointed out. "To meet a bunch of very angry artists and take their opinion."

As the trustee explained: "The KMB is an artist-driven biennale. This is both its strength and its weakness."

Another criticism levelled at the organisers is that since the biennale's 2020 edition was postponed to 2022 because of COVID-19, a lot of ground had already been covered. Some 80 artists had been chosen and half of them had begun work on their projects during the COVID years. Thus, on-site planning, too, could have been kicked off at least a year in advance, the critics pointed out.

NEED FOR PERMANENT VENUE

Perhaps that becomes difficult when there is no permanent venue. Every year the foundation has to do a lot of running around to negotiate with private landowners and complete extensive maintenance work in a short period of time, resulting in a lack of progress if not successive delays and in the focus shifting to infrastructural work rather than creative engagement. The obvious solution is to get a manager on board while Bose Krishnamachari concentrates on the art. Can the KMB trust ensure this?

The Kerala government continues to be a major financial backer—roughly Rs.7 crore was provided in the latest budget—but it seems to be dragging its feet on the venue issue. It has been a decade since the biennale began; acquiring a permanent place need not take so long. The first edition of the biennale in 2012 reportedly fetched over Rs.5 crore, and it has since steadily increased. Sustained support from the government and from other institutions is necessary for such creative initiatives to succeed.

The KMB Foundation has battled many challenges since 2012, from financing and labour issues to sexual harassment charges and the unprecedented postponement this year. But it has come through, succeeding not just in elevating the status of artists from the region and increasing awareness locally about art and artists but in firmly placing Kochi on the global art map.

If the biennale keeps its date with December 23, this year's edition, curated by Singapore-based artist Shubhigi Rao under the theme "In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire", will finally throw open over 100 creative projects by 87 artists from 24 nations, not to mention invitation programmes, partner projects, and satellite exhibitions. It will be on display until April 10. The "people's biennale" would have finally reached its audience. ☐

Nidheesh M.K. is a freelance writer based in Kerala.

A sublime address

There is drama when legends of Hindustani classical perform, and it is the experience of hearing and watching them live all through the night that has drawn the audience to Kolkata's iconic Dover Lane Music Conference over the last seven decades.

BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF January 27, 1986, as sitar legend Nikhil Banerjee played at the all-night Dover Lane Music Conference in south Kolkata, he started feeling uneasy. Forced to cut short his performance, he played one last piece—raga Deepak—at the audience's request before taking his leave. It was one of the most sublime renditions of the raga, said Monotosh Mukherjee, one of the organisers of the annual music festival who was present at that time. "It was out of the world. The audience was mesmerised." Hours later, Nikhil Banerjee passed away. He was 54.

Such stories about legends of Indian classical music are inextricably linked with Kolkata's iconic Dover Lane Music Conference, which turned 70 in 2022. Over the years, it has been the venue of not only some of the most memorable performances by maestros but has also launched new stars who have gone on to make a name for themselves.

HOW IT BEGAN

But the beginnings were anything but portentous: the concert started off as a result of a friendly rivalry between two adjacent localities in south Kolkata. "It was essentially a *para* (neighbourhood) function that started in 1952, meant to counter a neighbouring event. Even those who began it never thought that it would get so big eventually. Initially, it was more of an all-round entertainment event where, along with music, there were plays, dance recitals, and other performances,"said Bappa Sen, governing body member and former general secretary of the Dover Lane Music Conference. Playback singers such as Shyamal Mitra, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay, Sandhya Roy, who were big names in the Bengali film industry, performed here. Then sometime in the late 1950s, the programme shifted its focus from popular music to classical.

In the late1960s, however, internal issues in the organisation and the violent Naxal movement forced Dover Lane to go into a decade-long hiatus. It was not until 1978 that it was revived, and since then it has been held uninterrupted (even during the COVID-19 pandemic) every January. Under the leadership of a group of committed organisers, including Dipamoy (Rotu) Sen, Bula Ghosh, Saroj Dasgupta, and Ajit Ghosh, the Dover Lane concert moved from strength to strength. "It is because of their efforts that Dover Lane Music Conference is what it is today. They showed us the ropes, and we in turn have passed on their lessons and values to the ones who came after us," Sen said.

Over the years, the biggest names in Hindustani classical music have played at Dover Lane, including Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Dattatreya Vishnu Paluskar, Ustad Amir Khan, Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Bismillah Khan, Nissar Hussain Khan, Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal, and Hirabai Barodekar, besides maestros from Pakistan such as Ustad Salamat and Nazakat Ali Khan. The concerts have not just been about the performances: they have offered an intimate insight into the personalities, idiosyncrasies, passion, and genius of the legends. There is always an element of drama when the stalwarts perform, and it is this overall experience of hearing and watching them all through the night until the cold wintry dawn that has made the audience come back year after year for seven decades.

Everyone who has ever attended a Dover Lane Conference has some anecdote to narrate, such as during a performance of Pt Ravi Shankar and Ustad Zakir Hussain, the sitar legend stopped playing to listen to the young tabla maestro, son of his former *jugalbandi* partner Alla Rakha, enthralled by Hussain's strokes on the tabla as he continued solo for a few minutes. The applause at the end was tumultuous.

On another occasion, Bhimsen Joshi was so immersed in his singing that he did not realise he had turned his back to the audience. Upon opening his eyes, the master saw the curtains at the back of the stage and demanded that they be removed so that he could see his listeners. Snigdha Sen, who attended the conference quite regularly between 1960 and the late 1980s, remembers the time when Nissar Hussain Khan fell ill on stage while singing. "He suddenly stopped. But when they tried to take him back to the green room, he refused. He insisted on singing. While it was painful to see him in discomfort, we also got an inkling of

DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY/AFP

PANDIT RAVI SHANKAR and his daughter Anoushka Shankar perform at the Dover Lane Music Conference in 2009.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

THE DOVER LANE
MUSIC CONFERENCE
2015 · 63rd Annual
AUDIO CENTRE
AUDIO CENTRE

CLASSICAL VIOLINIST KALA RAMNATH performs with Abhijit Banerjee on tabla at the Dover Lane Music Conference in 2015.

SAROD MAESTRO USTAD AMJAD ALI KHAN performs at the Dover Lane Music Conference in 2011 when it was held at Nazrul Manch.

PTI

the commitment and passion he had for his art," Snigdha told *Frontline*.

At the time Dover Lane was revived in the late 1970s, classical music was on the wane in Kolkata. "Popular music was the craze at that time. Other organisations that used to host programmes of Hindustani classical music were shutting down, and there was a vacuum that Dover Lane filled when it restarted," said Monotosh Mukherjee.

Speaking of her experience of attending the concerts, journalist Indrani Dutta said: "It was an immersive experience. I used to attend the all-night sessions, come home, go to office, and then go back again for the next concert that very evening. In the wee hours of the morning as the concert ended, I would leave with the strains of music in my head which would continue to reverberate long into the day." She recalled that once she was so moved by a particular performance that she surreptitiously made a recording. "I have always been a compliant person who follows the rules. But on one occasion, the artiste was so good that I could not help recording on the sly the last bit of the recital," she said.

Snigdha said that as a student of music at that time she was amazed to see all those musicians together. She added: "Some performances still resonate—listening to Amjad Ali perform with Hariprasad Chaurasia at the crack of dawn, we were transported to a different world." Snigdha, who has trained under such legendary singers as Sukhendu Goswami and Satyakinkar Bandopadhyay, would sometimes attend Dover Lane with fellow students. "Often, after the concert, my friends would accompany me home and practise what we had heard over the night," she said.

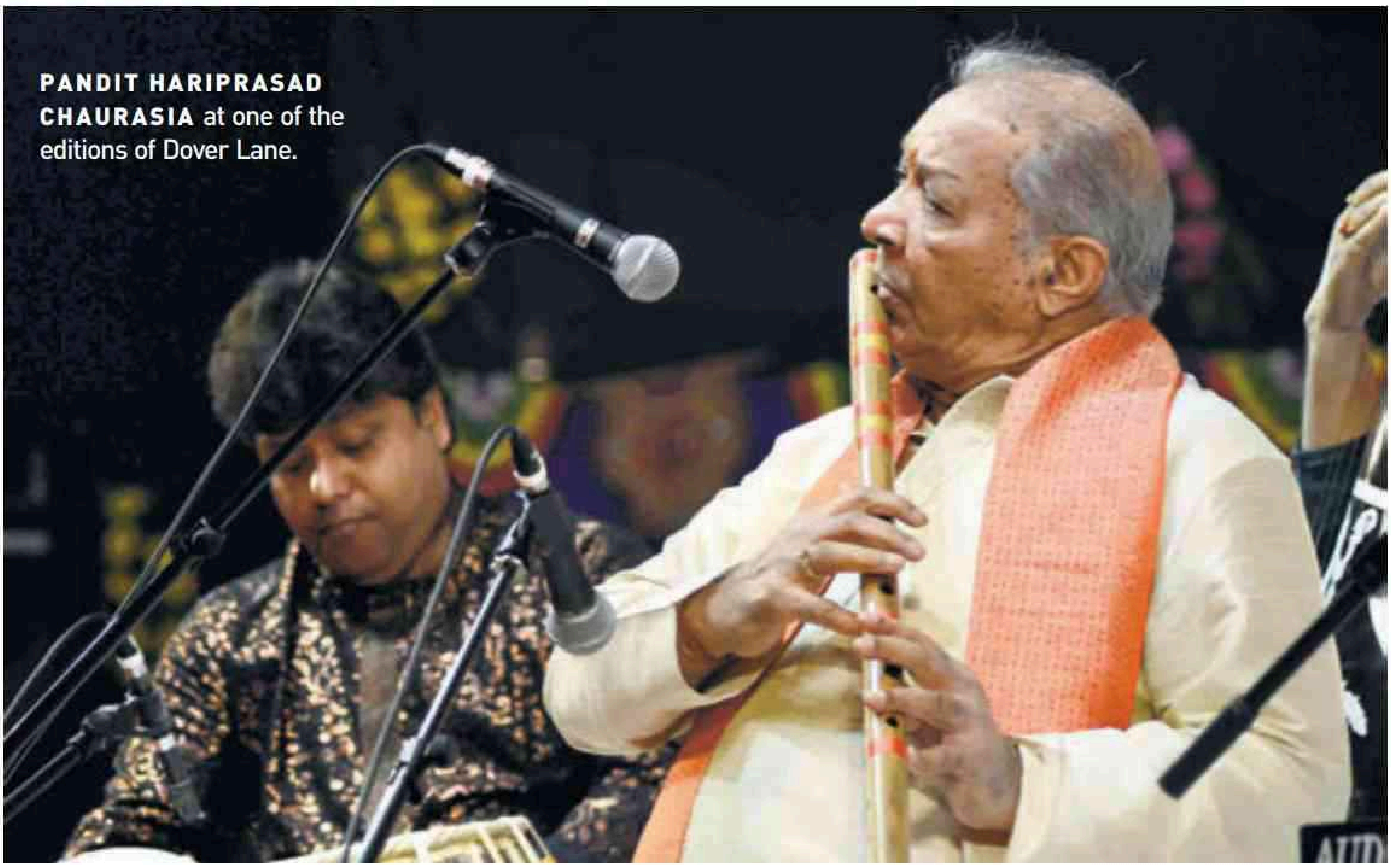
The old-timers remember the 1980s as a bygone era when music and culture were different from what they are now. Bappa Sen recalled that during the 1983 edition, Bhimsen Joshi suddenly called to say that he would not be able to perform that evening as he was unwell. The organisers had to find a suitable replacement on short notice. "We requested Pt Manas Chakraborty and practically picked him up from his residence. Manas *da* gave a spellbinding performance," said Sen. "There was a lot less ego in the great artistes of yesteryears," said Sen.

> It was not uncommon to see one legend coming not to play but to listen to another.

A DIFFERENT ERA

On another occasion, the organisers desperately needed a replacement for a celebrated artiste who had cancelled his performance at the last minute. "There were only landlines in those days, but we managed to track down Hariprasad Chaurasia *ji* at a hotel in Ahmedabad. He was returning to Mumbai after a concert. The then general secretary of Dover Lane requested him to come to Kolkata instead that evening, and Chaurasia *ji* immediately agreed. He came, played, and left," said Bappa.

It was not uncommon to see one legend coming not to play but to


PANDIT HARIPRASAD CHAURASIA at one of the editions of Dover Lane.

DOVER LANE MUSIC CONFERENCE

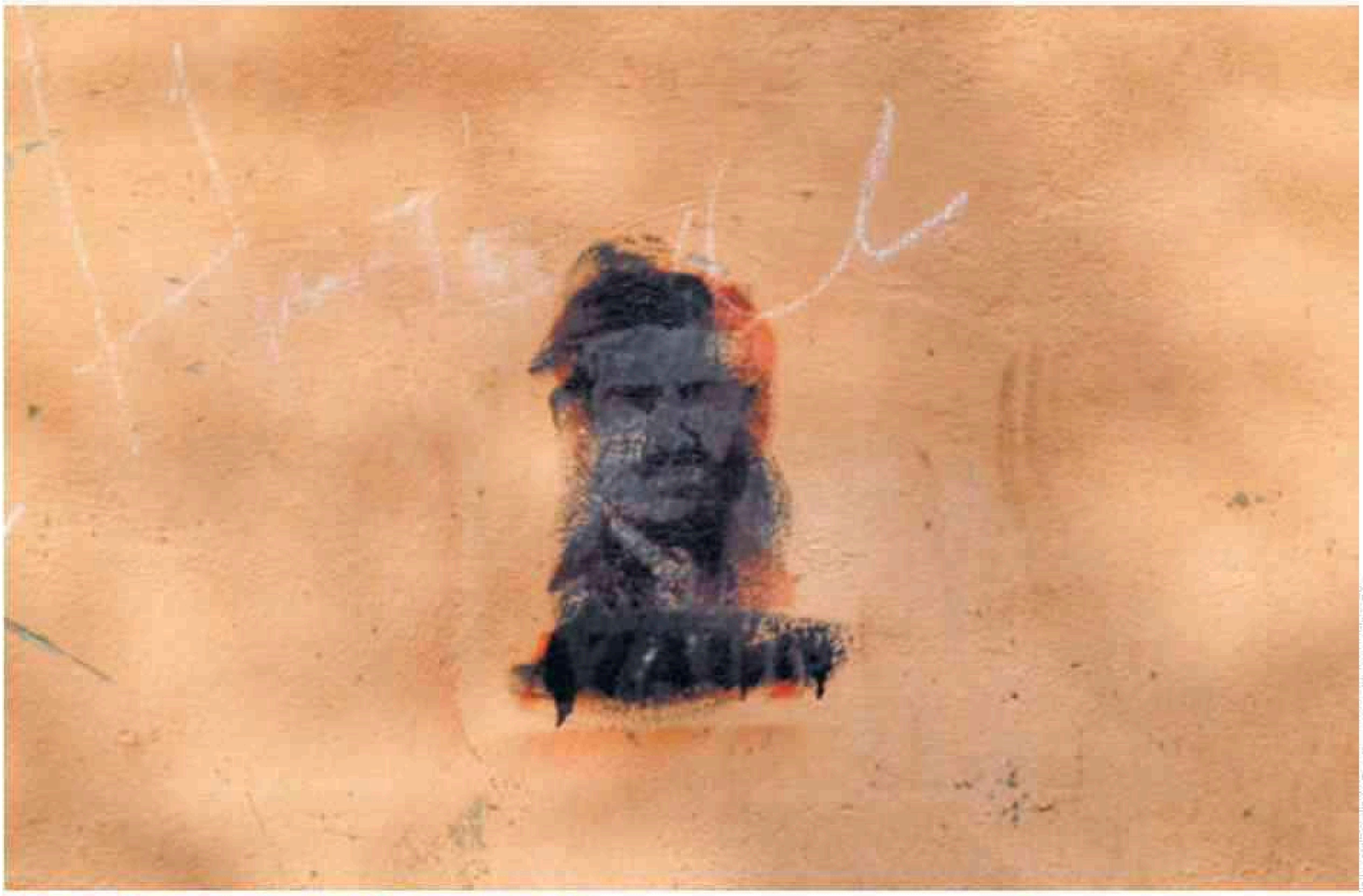
listen to another. "Once Pt Ravi Shankar had come to the conference just to hear Ali Akbar Khan's recital. He was not playing that year. Once Pt Jasraj, who had come to perform, was on his way from the airport to his place of stay. While going past the concert venue, he heard Chhannulal Mishra singing. He got out of the car and came in. The situation has changed a lot in every way, but it is best not to dwell on such things," Bappa added. The ambience of the venue has changed too. Until about 10 years ago, all the concerts—whether in Dover Lane (until 1982) or Hindustan Park (until 1985) or Vivekananda Park (until 1990) or Nazrul Mancha (to date)—used to take place in the open air. This lent a peculiar characteristic to the event as in the cold winter nights and early mornings, the artistes would often find their instruments going out of tune and retune in between recitals.

Once sitar legend Vilayat Khan was retuning his instrument in the early hours of the morning when a section of the audience thought that the performance was over and started leaving. The maestro put down his sitar and said: "Those of you who wish to leave please go ahead. Those who want to hear me continue playing may remain seated. I will start once everybody who is leaving has left." The confused, embarrassed, and delighted audience at once scurried back to their seats to hear the rest of the concert. Such confusion is not likely to happen any more as Nazrul Mancha, once known as the Open-air Theatre, has now been converted to a covered auditorium space.

With changing times, Dover Lane has also branched out. One of its most important functions is to promote the younger generation of classical musicians and singers, who are given a chance to perform alongside the legends. Abhijit Majumder, current general secretary of the organisation, refutes the claim that the younger generation is not of the same calibre as the older artistes. He said: "Many say that Amaan Ali Khan does not play as well as his father, Amjad Ali Khan. Of course, he doesn't since Amaan is just starting out. At his age, Amaan is playing very well, and if we do not listen to him now, how will he become an *ustad* later."

Dover Lane has reportedly "discovered" new singers through talent search contests. "Arijit Singh claims that he was discovered by our organisation. Famous classical singer of the Kirana Gharana, Sohini Roy Chowdhury, and the popular sarod sisters, Troilee and Moisilee Dutta, have all been associated with us," said Majumder. But the organisers do feel there is a decline of interest in classical music. "Many think that it is a status symbol to be seen at Dover Lane. People get the tickets, we expect a houseful, but on the day of the show, the auditorium is only half filled. Earlier we had people sitting out in the cold listening to the music inside," said Majumder.

However, for genuine lovers of Hindustani classical music, Dover Lane is one of the most important events of the year. Artistes are aware of that; during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the auditorium could only accommodate 50 per cent, many musicians either performed free or took a token amount. Performing at Dover Lane is still considered an honour, even if its glory has dimmed somewhat over the last few years. ☐



PHOTOGRAPHS: HASSNAIN RIZA

GRAFFITI DEPICTING MAQBOOL BHAT, founder of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, in Srinagar's Lalchowk on January 24, 2022. Bhat was hanged on February 11, 1984, in Delhi's Tihar Jail.

Walls of defiance

Shouting out from the walls of private houses and public buildings in Srinagar, graffiti is a statement of both resistance and remembrance in Kashmir.

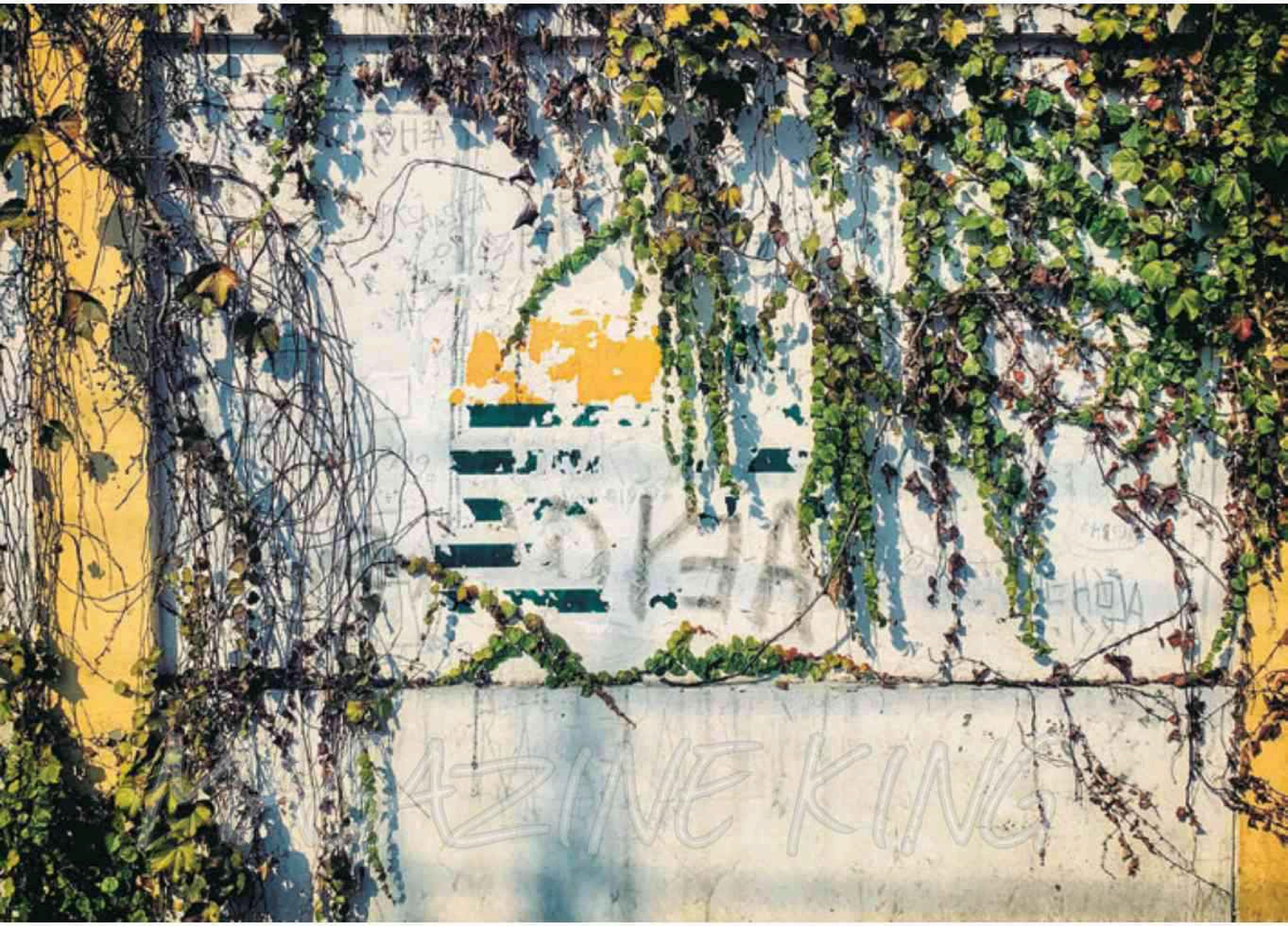
Text & photographs by MEHAK WANI and HASSNAIN RIZA

THE WORD "RESISTANCE" HAS DIFFERENT connotations, which can extend from the political to the psychological. The visual representation of political resistance often takes the form of graffiti, which the Street Art Museum, Amsterdam, defines as "an anti-hegemonic art form able to cross bourgeois conventions and redeem itself as an instrument of social claim and critique". Oppressed groups, whose voices go unheard in the corridors of power, express what they want through graffiti, which, being unashamedly in your face, is difficult to ignore.

Kashmir has a long history of resistance, which has found expression in art. In recent years, graffiti has evolved as one of the most impactful tools in the hands of artists protesting against government diktats. Shouting out from the walls of private houses and public buildings, it is a mark of both resistance and remembrance.

Graffiti became a common sight from the 1990s onward and surged in 2016, when the Valley went into lockdown after the assassination of Burhan Wani, commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, separatist leader and chief of Tehreek-e-Hur-

GRAFFITI IN THE HABBA KADAL locality in December 2021.



AZINE KING

THE FLAG OF so-called Azad Jammu and Kashmir on a wall in Lalchowk in May 2022.

riyat, called upon his followers to spray-paint slogans on their walls. A wall of Geelani's residence had "Go India, Go Back" written on it. What was apparently in the minds of hundreds of civilians was suddenly out in the open. In a State where any form of dissidence is repressed brutally, graffiti gives artists a precious space where they can remain anonymous and yet talk openly. One of the most common examples of graffiti on the streets of Kashmir is "Azaadi", written in Urdu.

Ahmed (name changed) was 16 when Indian soldiers assassinated Burhan Wani. In the ensuing turmoil, Ahmed, who resides in Old Srinagar's Fateh Kadal, started painting graffiti on city walls. "Kashmir was going through a really hard time. There were casualties. Some of my friends received pellet injuries. Everything was under siege, with paramilitary troops stationed everywhere," Ahmed recalls. As a protest against the state, he spray-painted a street sign saying "Drive Slow" into "Pakistan Town".

Similarly, Faizan (name changed), an art student in his 20s, recalls drawing the Pakistani flag on a shop shutter in his neighbourhood. "I also painted the Palestinian flag on a tin fence in my alley," Faizan said. He is inspired by Palestinian graffiti. "I first learnt about graffiti while watching the 2011-12 Gaza protests on television. Later, I made my own on walls in my area," he said.

Artists often find their graffiti altered into pro-government statements or erased overnight with black paint. Then they create more, which are changed or blackened again, and the cycle goes on. The slogans are a reminder to the establishment that the people will not be gagged even if they are not given a chance to protest. ☐

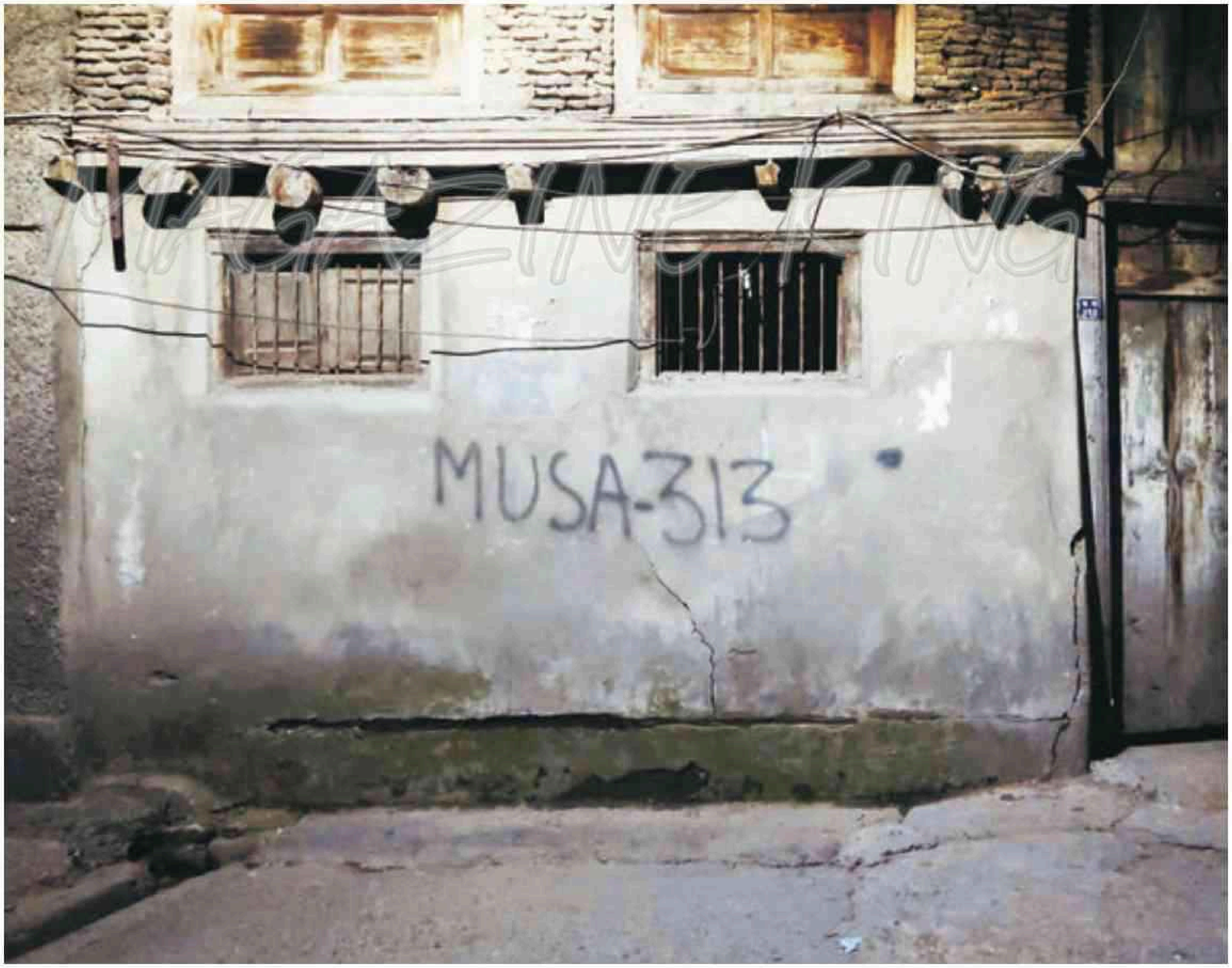
Hassnain Riza is a journalist based in Srinagar. His work has appeared in several Indian and International organisations such as Associated Press, Alamy, and Article 14. He tweets at @hasnain_riza.

Mehak Wani is an English literature graduate from Srinagar. She tweets at @mehakwani26

BLACKENED graffiti in the Lalchowk area.

WE
REMEMBER
NEELOFAR
SABIR

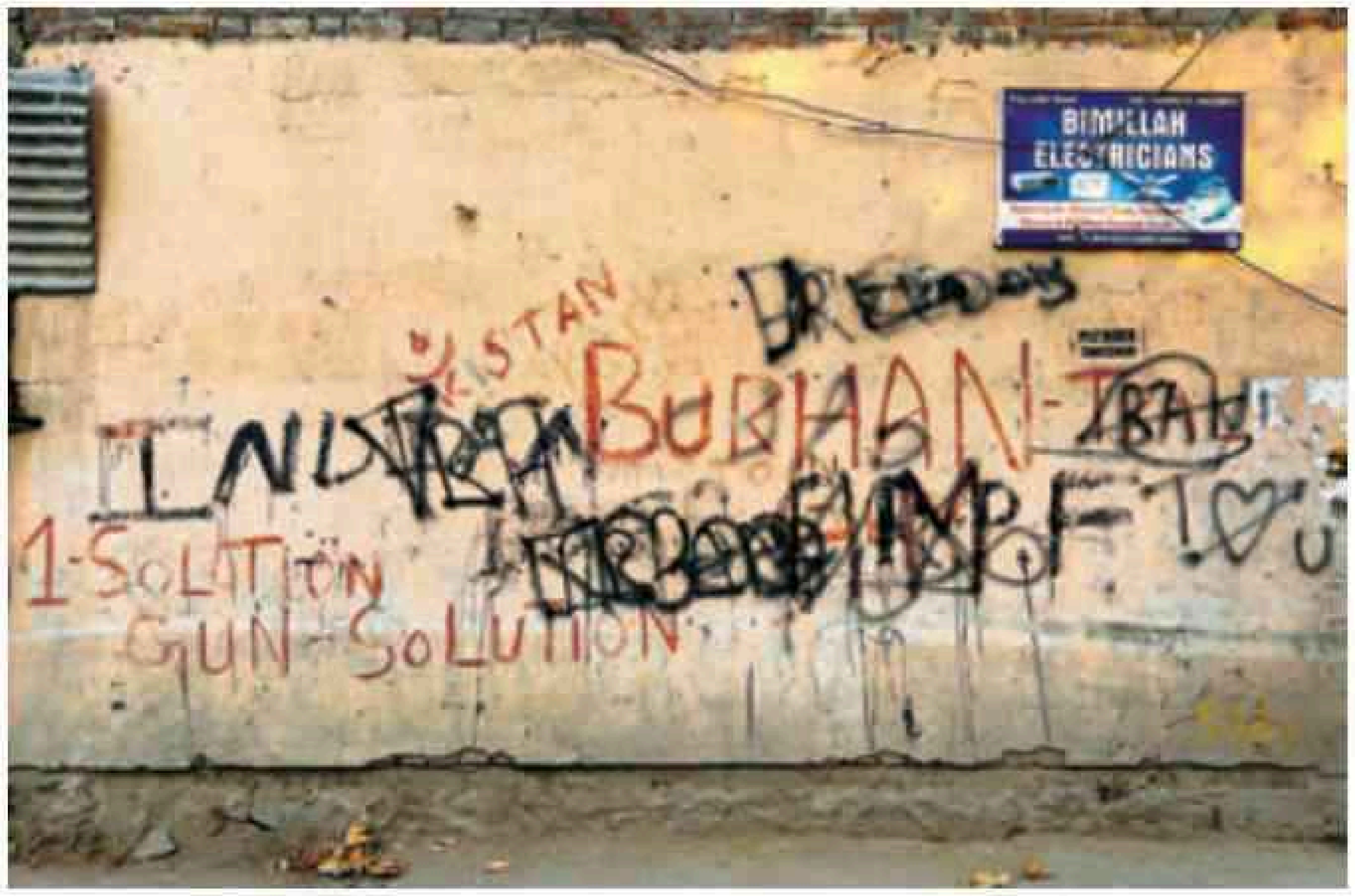
BLACKENED "We remember Neelofar" graffiti on a government building in Lalchowk.



GRAFFITI glorifying the Kashmiri rebel leader Zakir Musa.

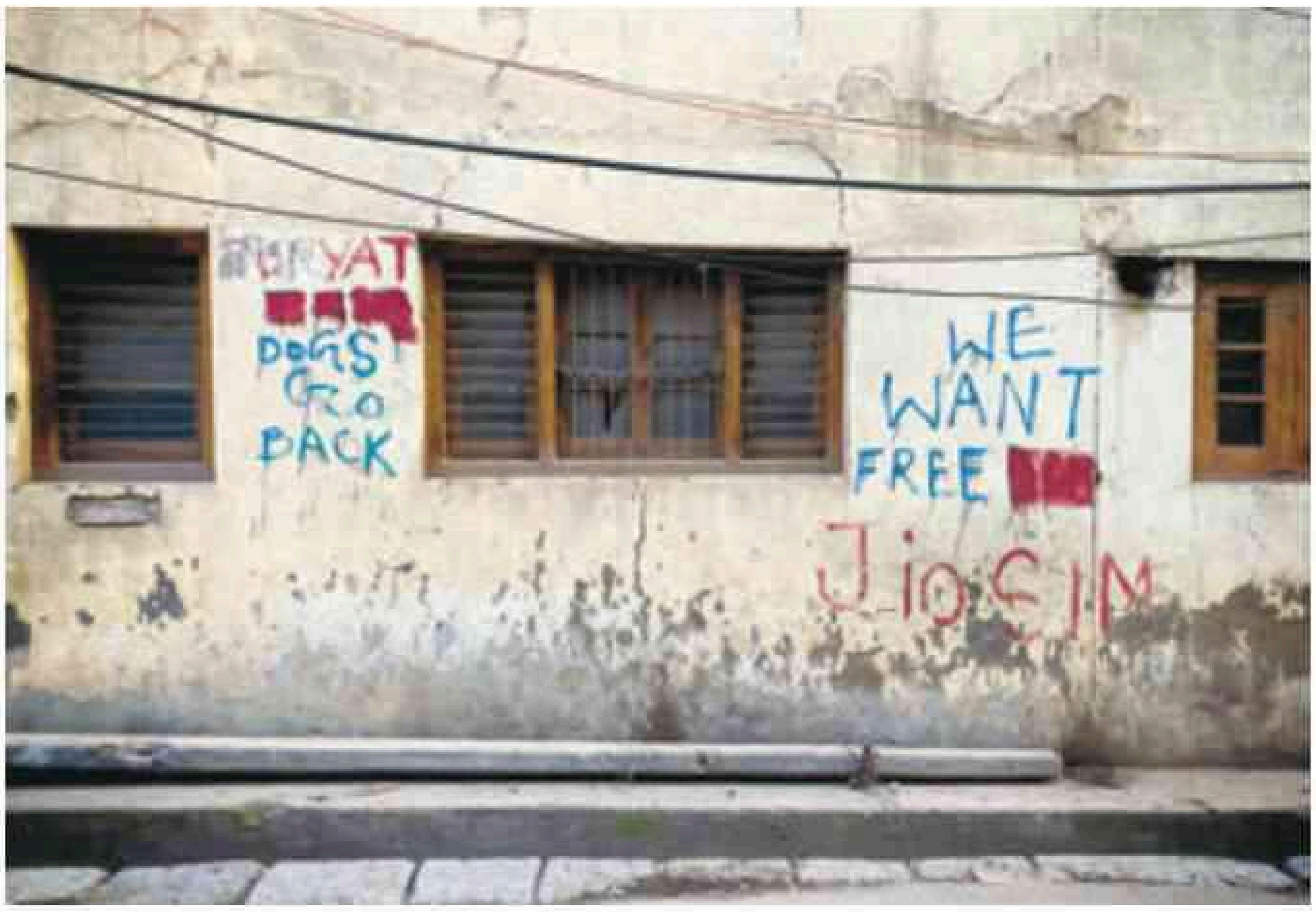
Laanath
Hindustanas

GRAFFITI in the Shalimar Bagh area in January 2022.

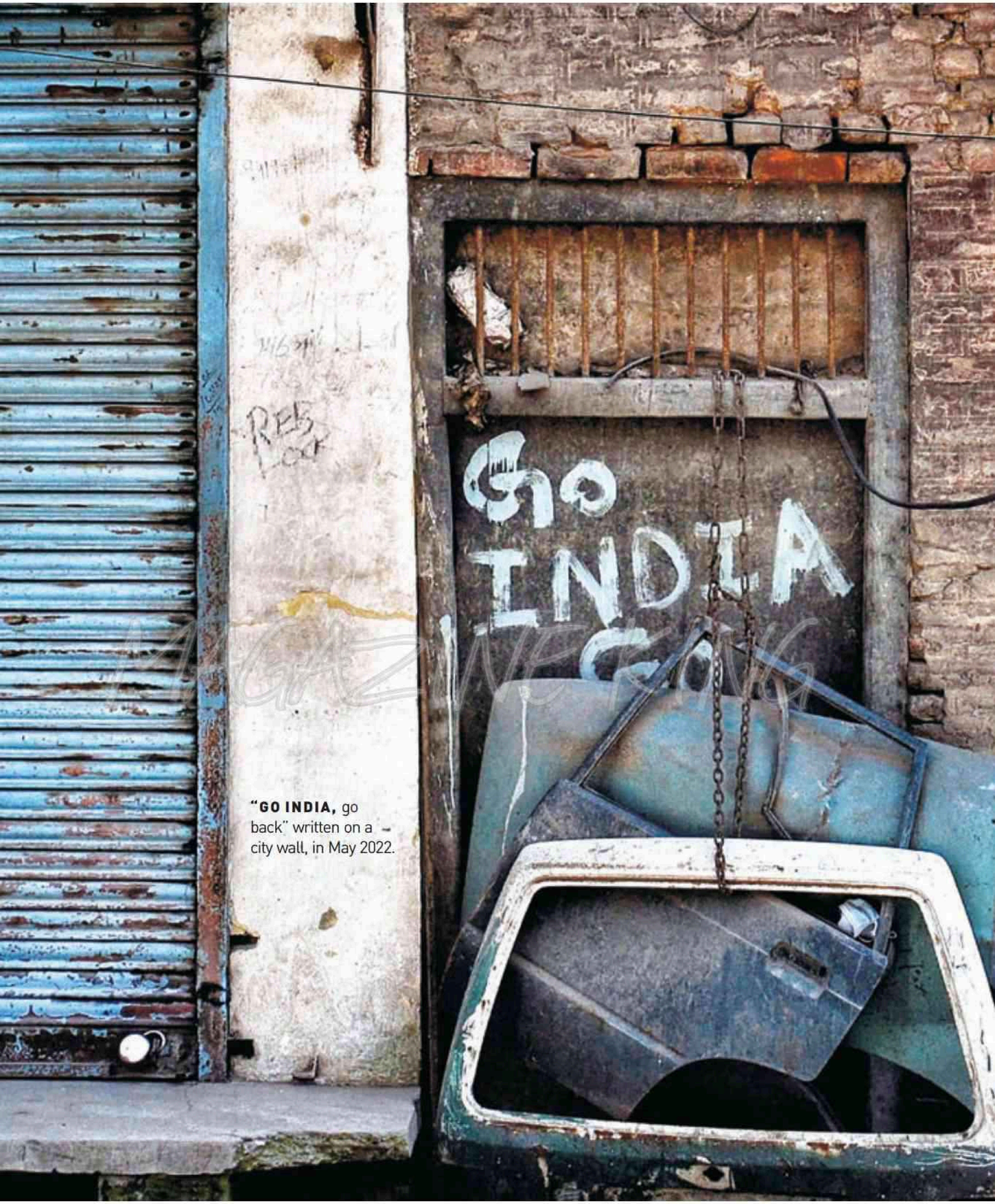

BISMILLAH ELECTRICIANS
BURHAN
1-SOLUTION
GUN-SOLUTION

GRAFFITI in Srinagar's uptown area honouring Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani.

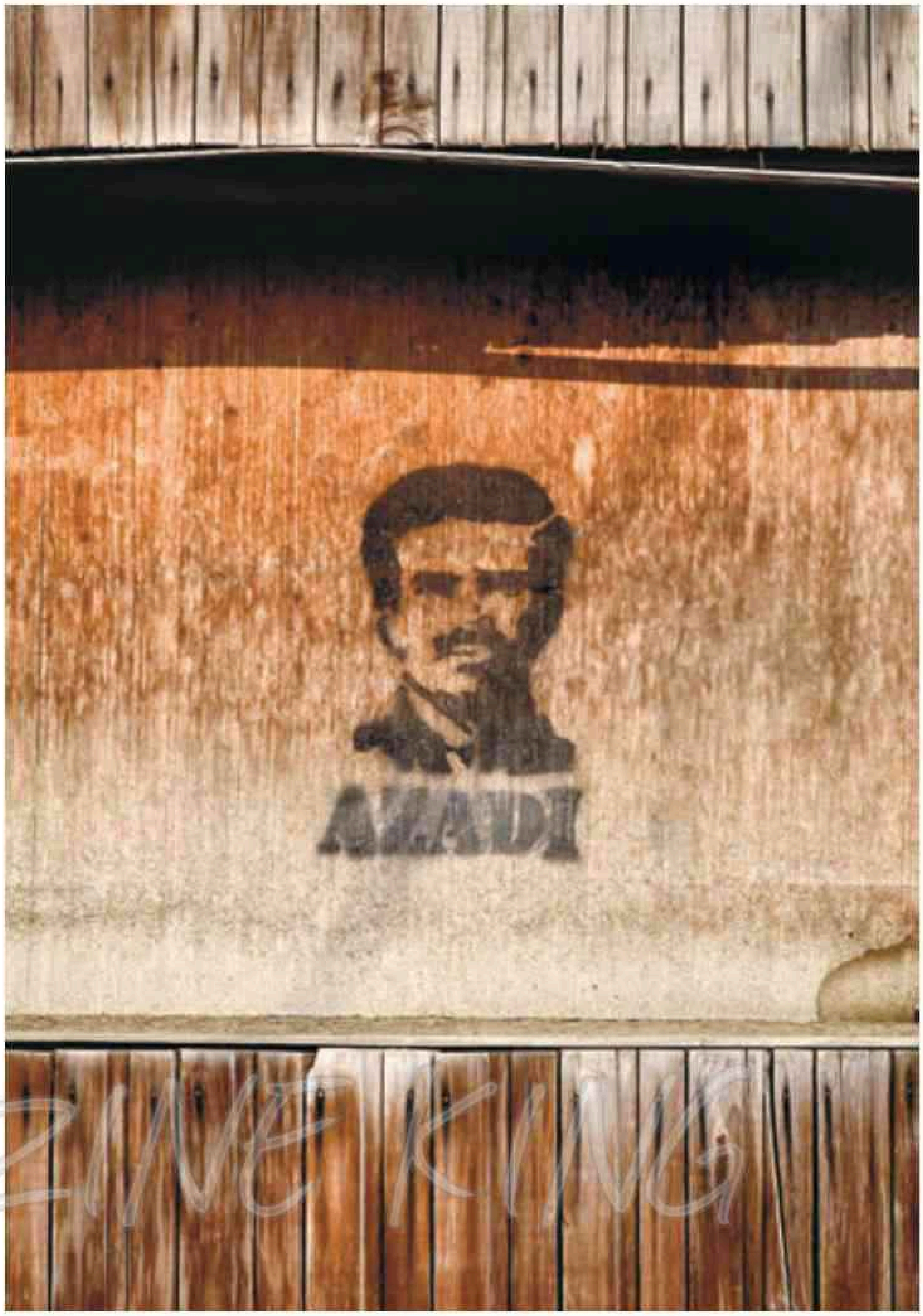
GRAFFITI ON a college wall in downtown Srinagar in December 2022.


DOGS GO BACK
WE WANT FREE
Jio SIM

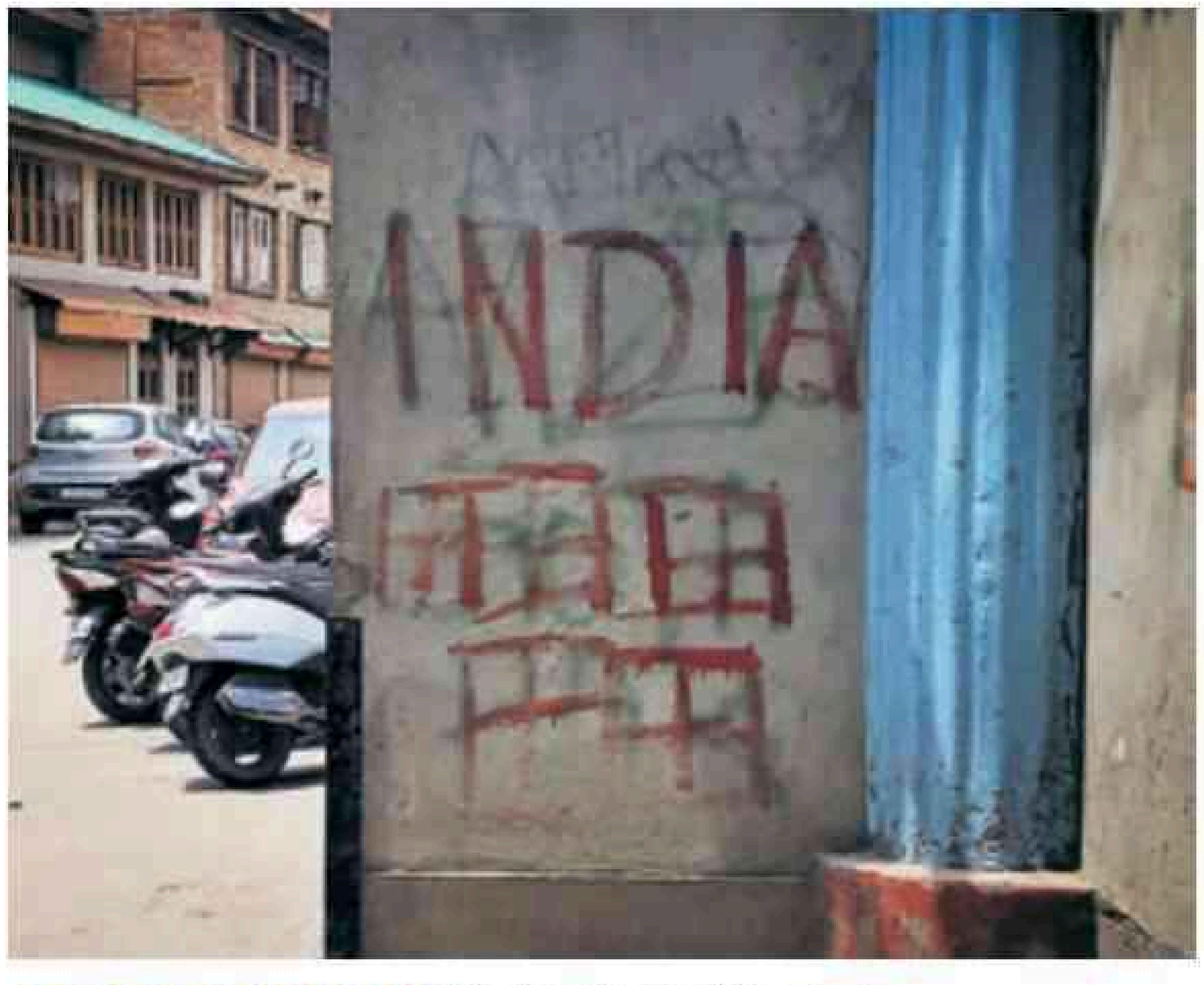
GRAFFITI in Saraf Kadal repainted with other words, November 2022.



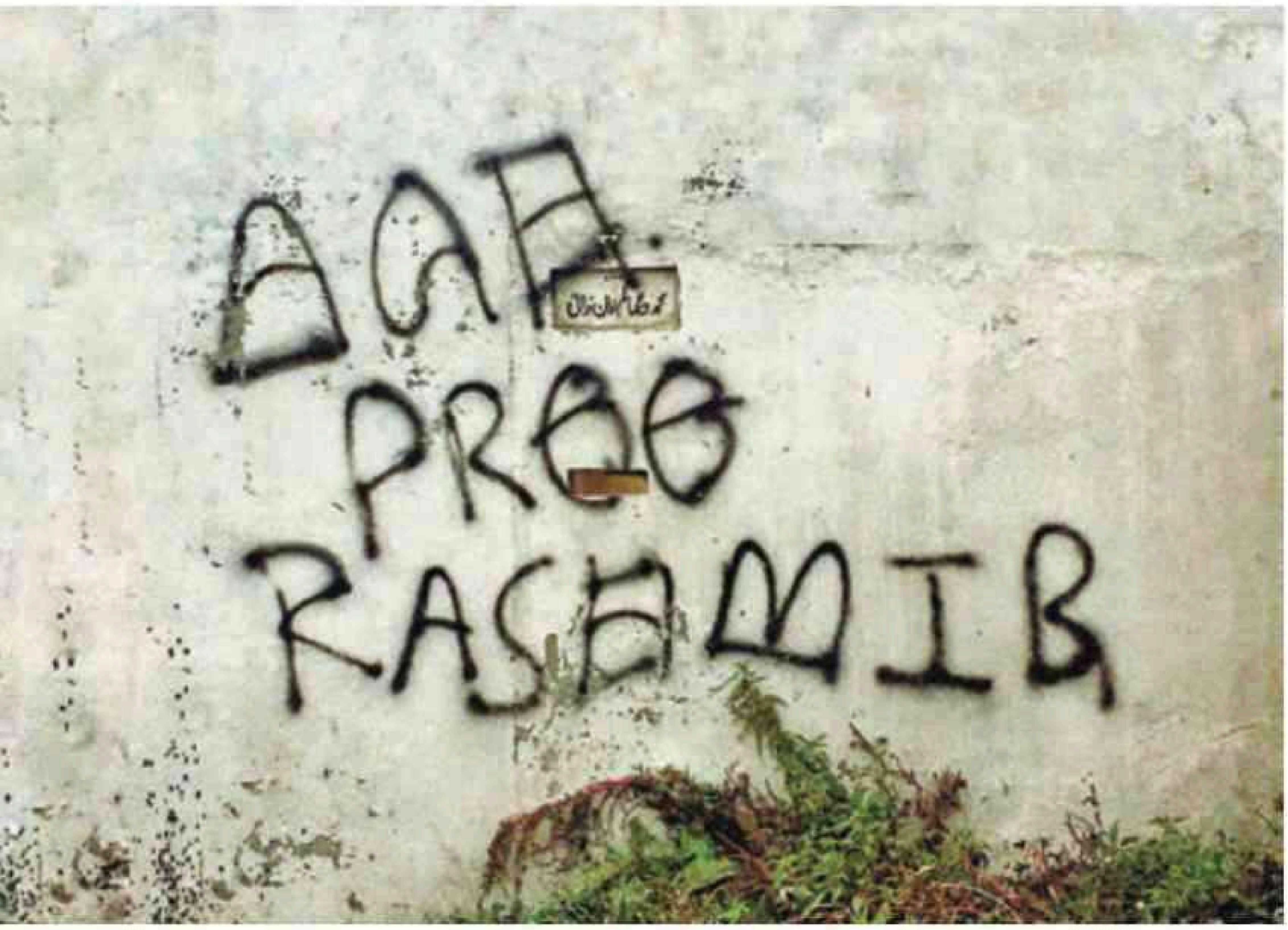
"GO INDIA, go back" written on a city wall, in May 2022.



ARTWORK depicting Maqbool Bhat, in Shalimar in January 2022.

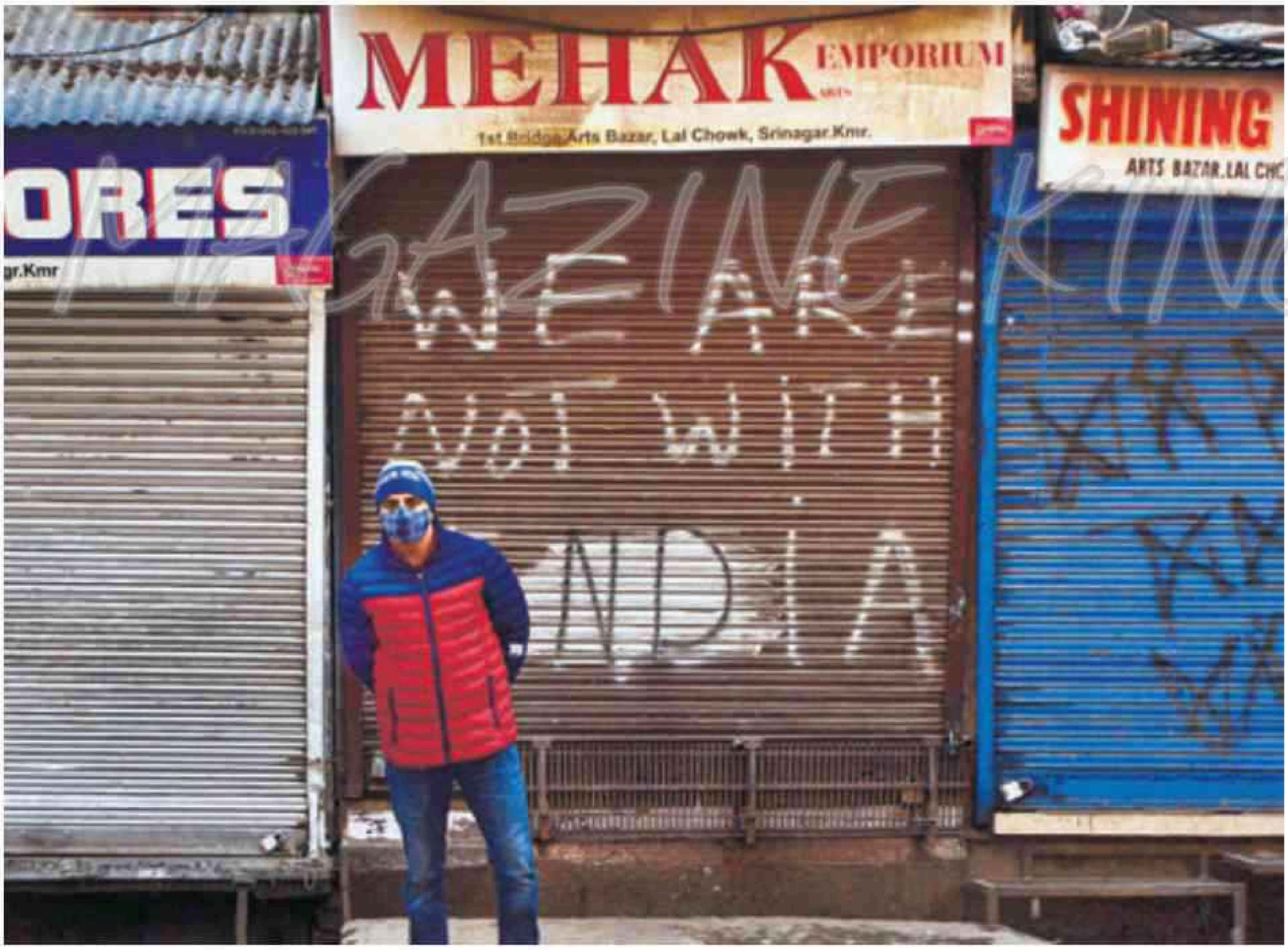


DEFACED GRAFFITI in downtown Srinagar.

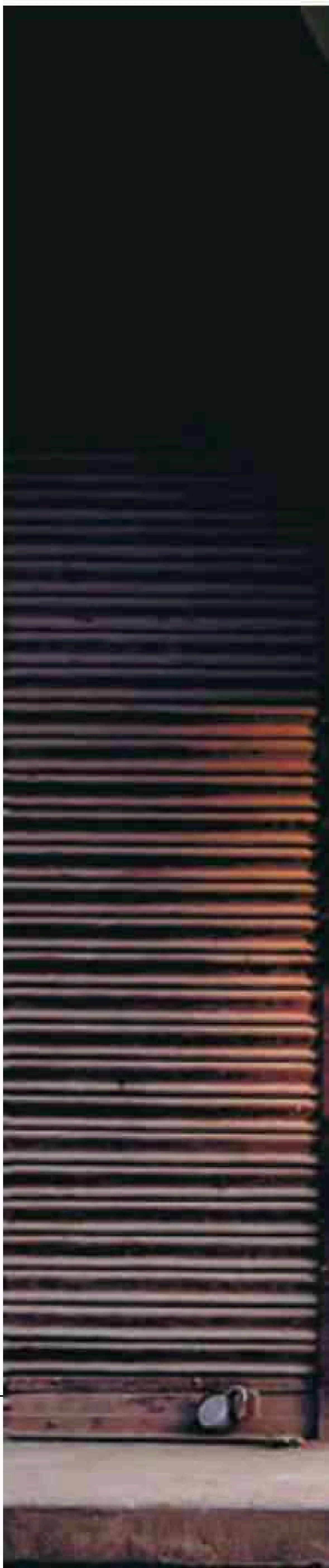

AAB FREE KASHMIR

"FREE KASHMIR" graffiti in the Hawal area in October 2022.

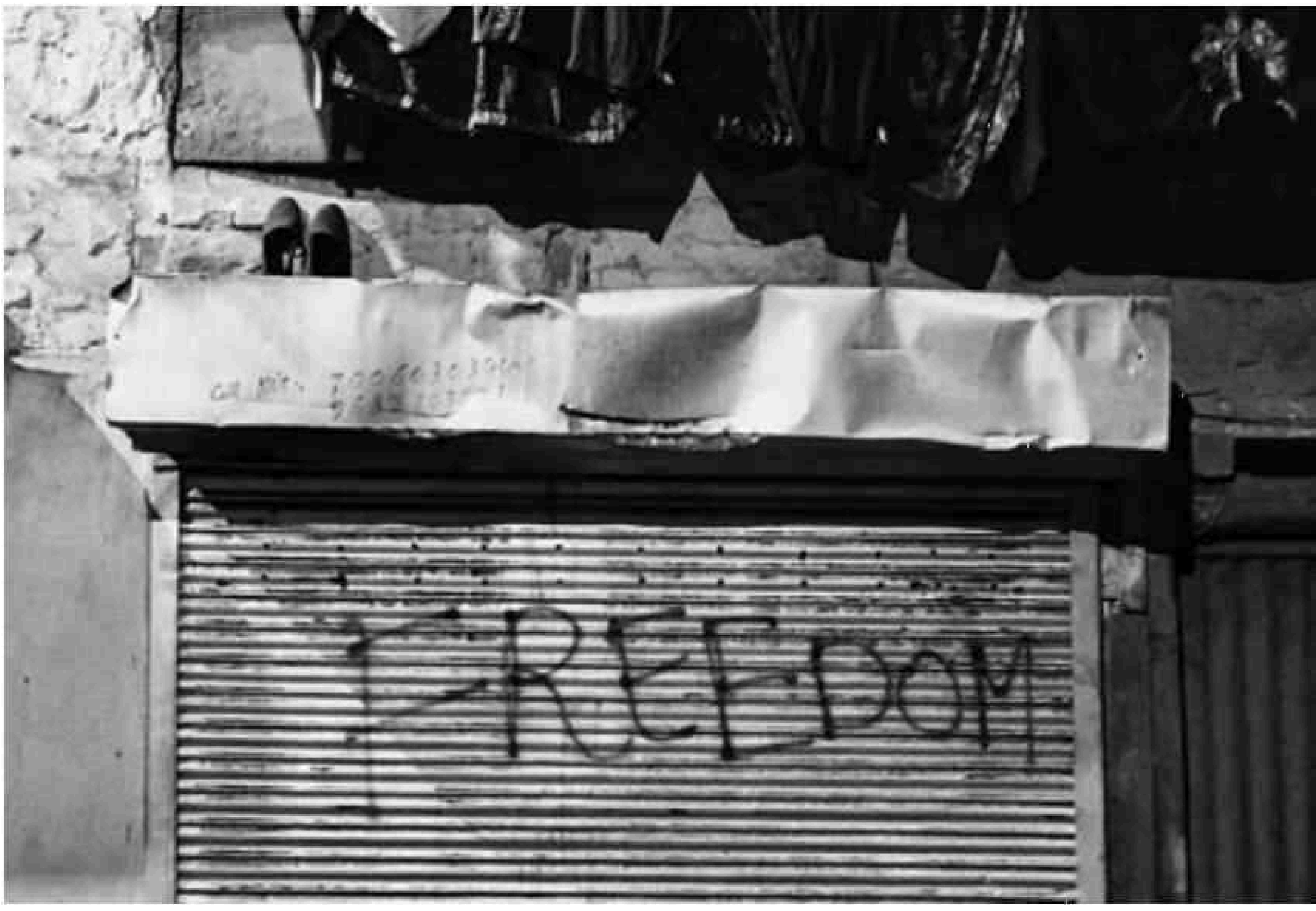
DEFACED GRAFFITI in downtown Srinagar.


MEHAK EMPORIUM
1st Bridge Arts Bazar, Lal Chowk, Srinagar.Kmr.
SHINING
ARTS BAZAR.LAL CH
ORES
WE ARE NOT WITH INDIA

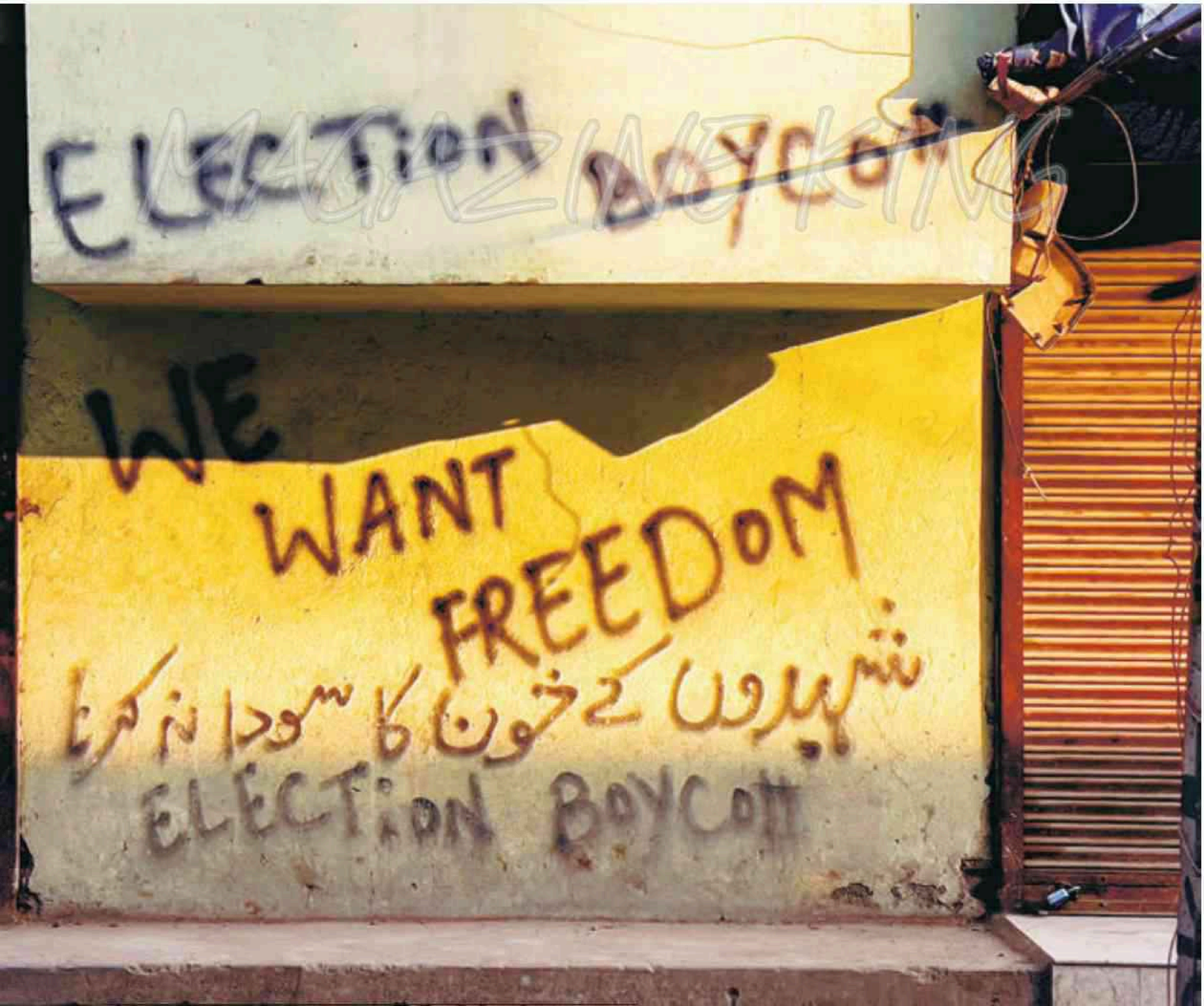
GRAFFITI on shop shutters in the Kokar Bazar area.



GRAFFITI in the Mehjoor Nagar area, which says *Shaheedun ke khoon ka sauda na karna* ("Don't sell the blood of martyrs").



"FREEDOM" WRITTEN on a shop shutter in Habba Kadal in December 2022.


ELECTION BOYCOTT
WE WANT FREEDOM
شہیدوں کے خون کا سودا نہ کرنا
ELECTION BOYCOTT

PABLO BARTHOLOMEW

ABAN RAZA by Pablo Bartholomew.

Lived realities

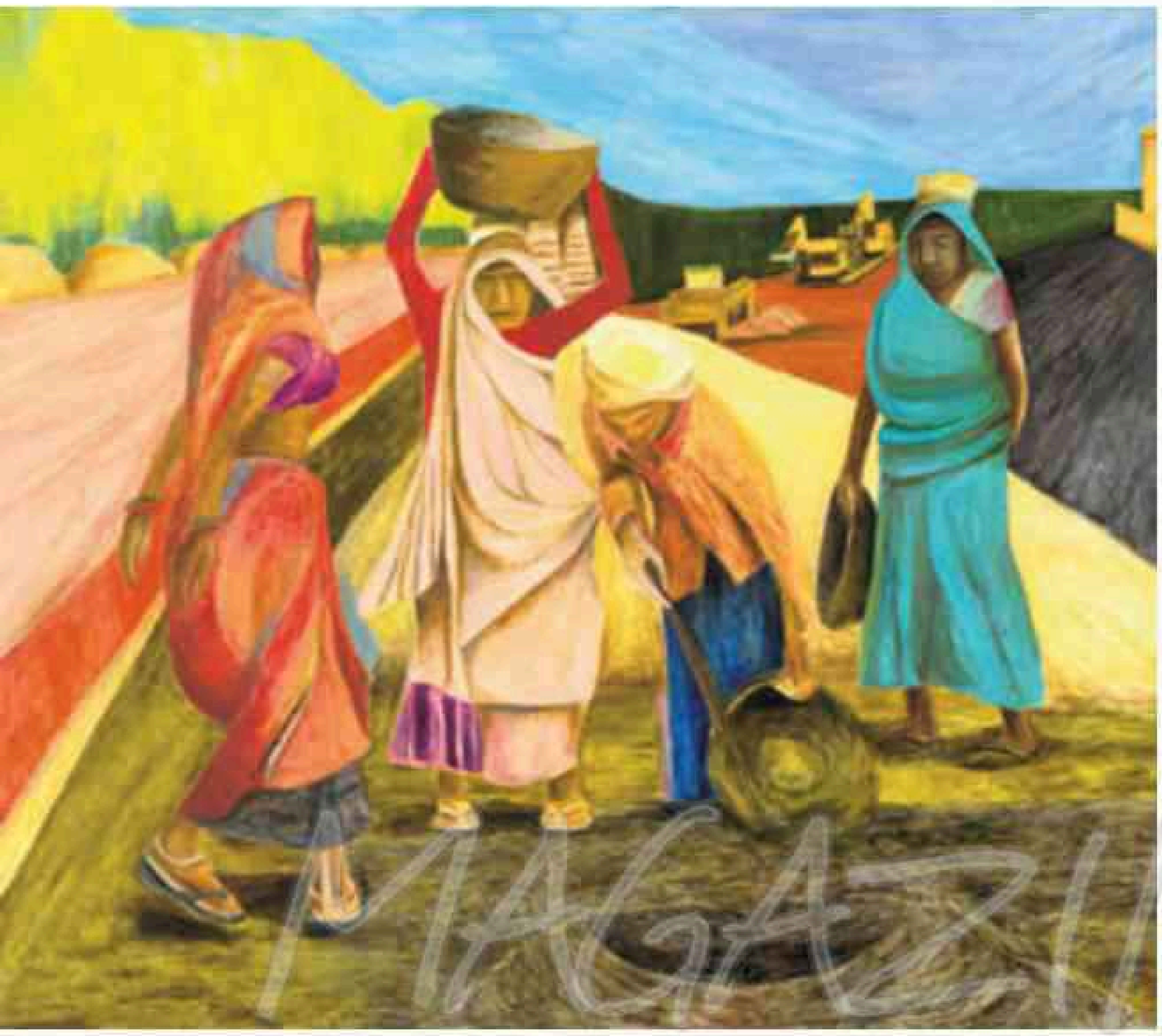
Aban Raza's emphatically social paintings make us see the "invisible" people whose labour fuels the economy.

BY **ARUSHI VATS**

ABAN RAZA'S SOLO EXHIBITION OF LARGE-format oil paintings is dominated by bodies—bodies bearing the charge of dissent, bodies engaged in constant labour, and the invisible but ever-present body of the Constitution as a site of contestation. Running from November 3 until December 28 at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai, Raza's show, titled "There is Something Tremendous About the Blue Sky", serves as a memory log of the events that have marked public life in India in the past two years, charting both the excesses and assaults of the state and the widespread civic eruptions that challenged these. Nestled between the great events are ordinary moments, depicted through train journeys, construction work, or the after-hours of a wedding celebration. Made between 2020 and 2022, the period darkened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the paintings are marked by a refreshing publicness; they look outward and are consistently social, drawing attention to those who could not afford to retreat into safety in the fractured republic.

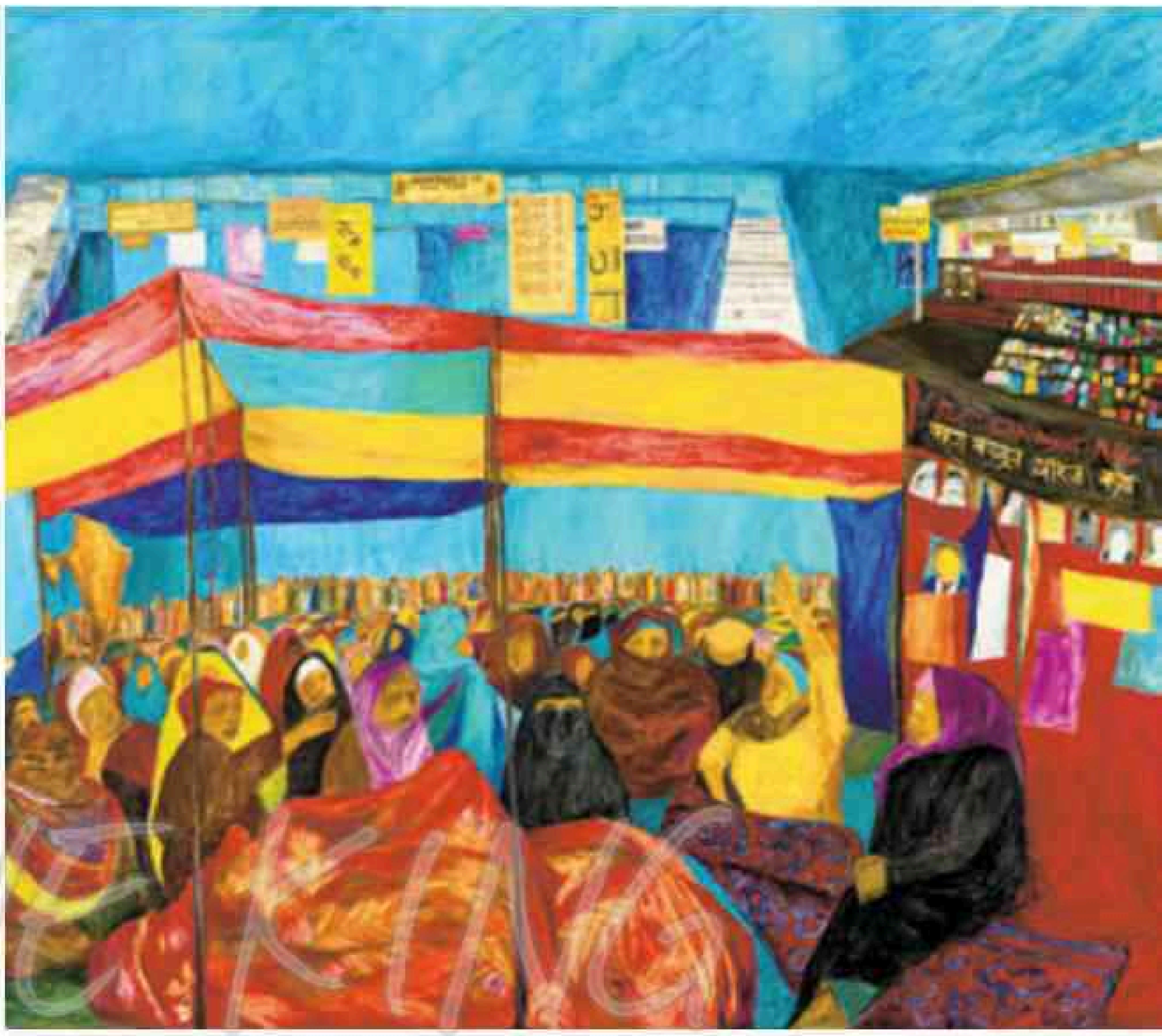
Delhi-based Aban Raza (b. 1989) held her debut solo exhibition titled "Luggage, People and a Little Space" at the same gallery in Mumbai in 2020. "I paint because I feel the need to respond to events and also because this is all I know," she says. Having studied painting and printmaking in Delhi College of Art, she has held exhibitions at Art Heritage, New Delhi, and the Lalit Kala Akademi, Lucknow. Currently Visiting Faculty in the Graphics Department, Faculty of Fine Arts, Jamia Millia Islamia, Raza curated "Celebrate. Illuminate. Rejuvenate. Defend the Constitution at 70" in 2020, and "Beyond Dispute: Landscapes of Dissent" for SAHMAT in Delhi in 2018. She received the Somnath Hore Award in 2013, the AIFACS Award in 2014, and a Lalit Kala Akademi research grant in 2013-14.

ABAN RAZA



"RAJPATH, Delhi"oil on canvas, 2022.

ABAN RAZA



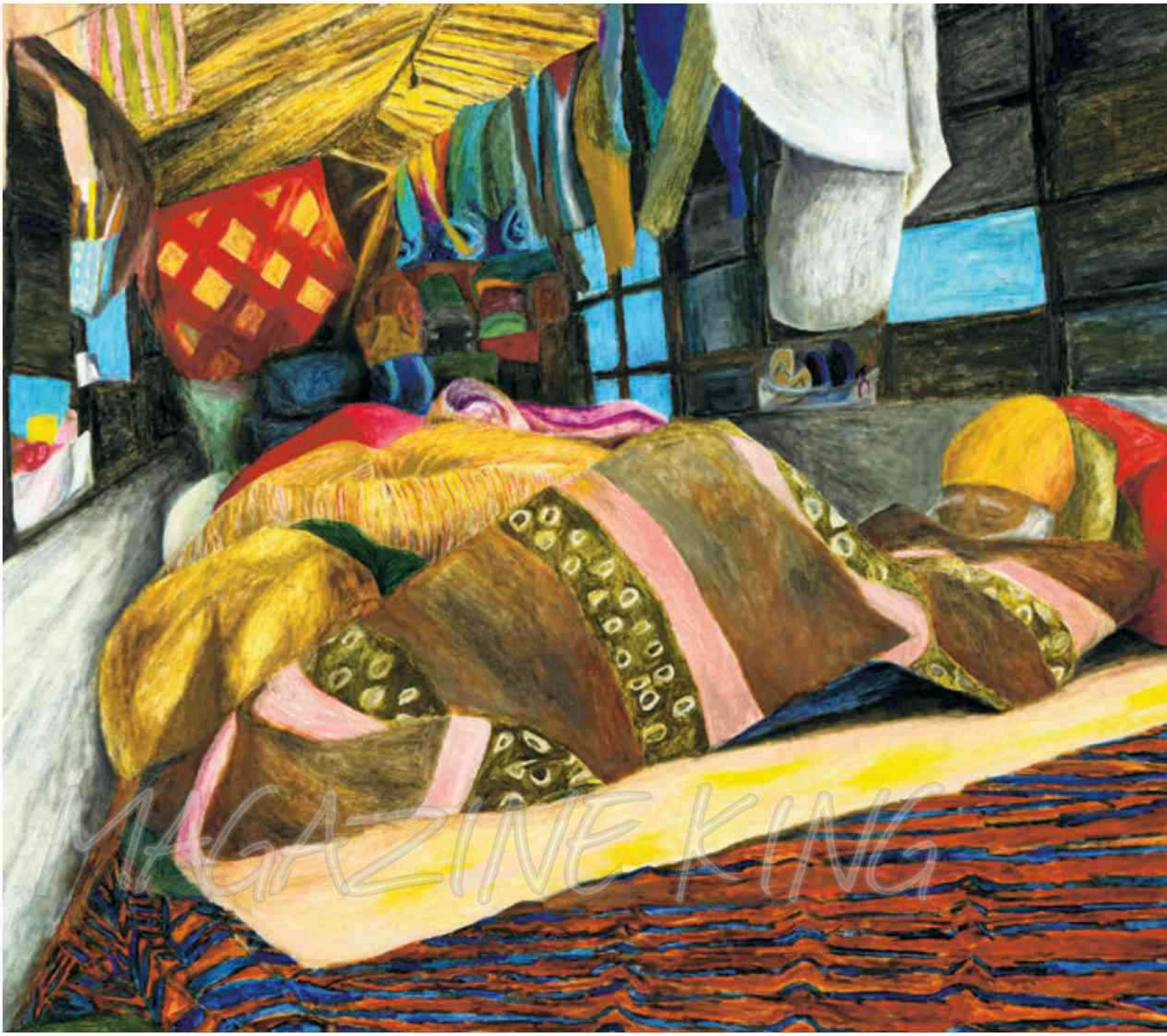
"SHAHEEN BAGH, Delhi", oil on canvas, 2022.

FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Raza's paintings in the current exhibition alert us to the realities of the lives of the socially disadvantaged, who continued working at a time when the privileged could isolate and distance themselves. They underline how class and caste locations determine the worlds we inhabit. For instance, in "Rajpath, Delhi" (2022), work on the Central Vista goes on during the pandemic: we see four labourers who dig the earth and carry the debris in pans perched on their heads. In the background there are two JCB machines and two familiar monuments—India Gate and Rajpath—the latter recently renamed Kartavya Path by the government, in a reminder of duty. The painting raises the question: whose duty? While the labourers' safety was under threat during the pandemic, work on the project went on unhindered. The JCB machines, infamous now as a symbol of demolition-based nationalism, also signify the constant churning of capital—its insatiable desire for "creative destruction" which fuels vanity projects such as this.

Raza's paintings invite patient observation—gazing upon a few canvases, one realises that the background, while apparently distant, is close enough for the figures there to be recognisable. The background is flush with details that render the worlds of the subjects in the foreground startlingly real. In "MKSS Yatra, Rajasthan" (2021), a group of women, some of them holding pages resembling official documents, stand before a wall showing rows of financial accounts. MKSS is the acronym for Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, a non-party organisation that played a pioneering role in getting the Right to Information Act, 2005, ensuring transparency in governance, passed in India. In the painting, which was made made after Raza's visit to one of the pilot villages where the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was implemented, the wall is a site for shared social accounting. Next to the wall is a road on which progresses a vehicle conducting a voter awareness rally. It carries a large puppet and a loudspeaker, with the word *matdata* (voter) inscribed on it. Raza says: "I toured multiple districts in Rajasthan where the MKSS has been actively advocating and developing systems of social accounting and distributive justice." The painting tells this story through the details. Regarding her practice, Raza says: "As an artist, my primary objective is to support a commentary which encourages actions for a just society."

Women with documents are seen again in "Devdungri, Rajasthan" (2022), where village women, their faces under *ghunghat*, are gathered before a hut. While the veil suggests the patriarchal society they live in, the papers in their hands might convey a degree of awareness created by social campaigns. Here, as in her other paintings, Raza



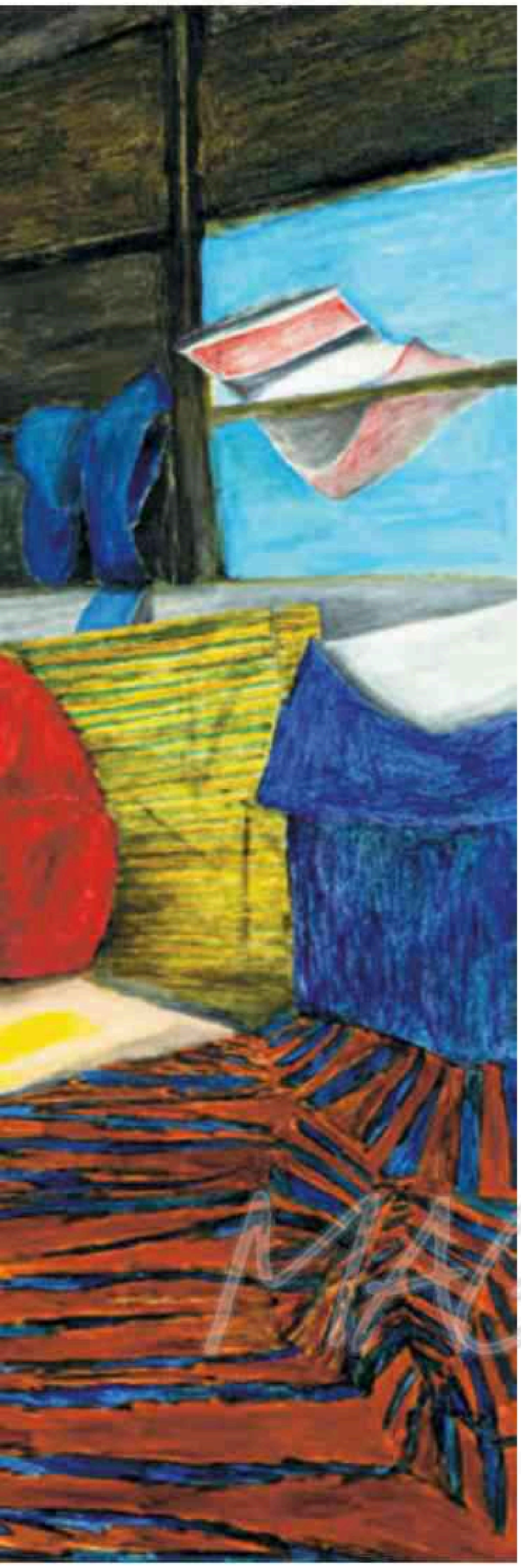
"SINGHU BORDER, Delhi-Haryana", oil on canvas, 2022.

records life as she sees it. But she trains her eyes on women, who are often foregrounded. Raza says that in the course of her travels all over north India, especially Rajasthan, she was struck by how much of labour, both inside and outside the household, is performed by women. But much of it remains invisible and unaccounted for: in that sense, Raza's paintings make us "see" the unseen.

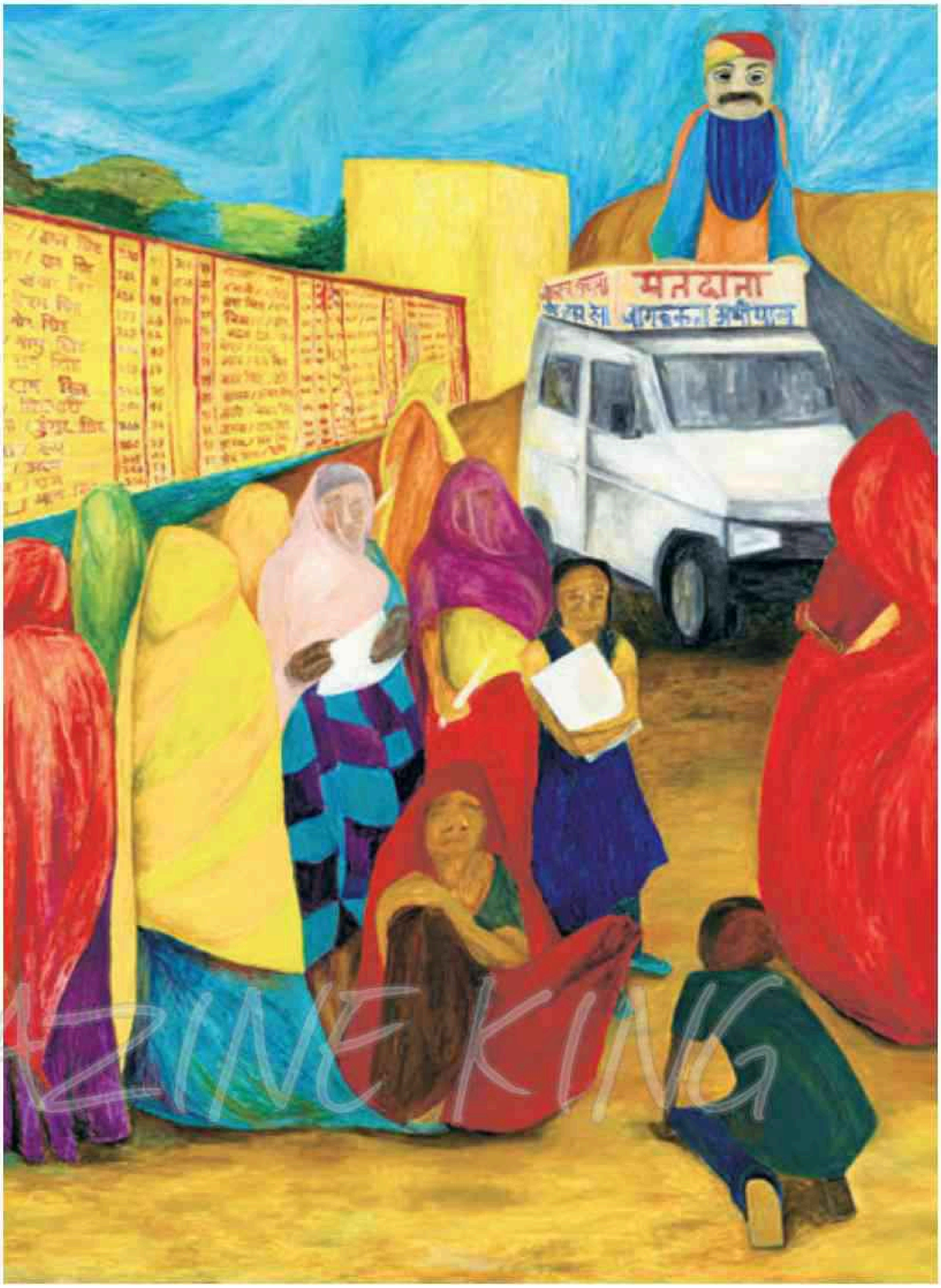
> The bright colours suggest daylight and also the hours spent under the harsh sun by labourers.

FRATERNITY AND CARE

Nearly all her subjects are dressed in bright colours, which also suggest daylight and the hours spent under the harsh sun by labourers. The colours deepen subtly in works such as "Sleeper Train, Jharkhand" (2021), "Sleeper Train, Karnataka" (2020), and "Passenger Train, Karnataka" (2022), showing the interiors of packed train compartments. The unique blue that marks the berths of Indian Railways tinges the paintings with a coolness that seeps into the colours of the passengers' garments, giving us a muddied and sallow palette. The figures are slouched, bent, or slumped together—a reminder of the duration of journeys and the intimacy of



ABAN RAZA



ABAN RAZA

"MKSS YATRA, Rajasthan", oil on canvas, 2021.

unfamiliar bodies in crowded spaces. They also suggest the fragility of rest for labourers—even in slumber they look tired.

Minutely observed details invigorate "Shaheen Bagh, Delhi" (2022) and "Tikri Border, Delhi-Haryana" (2021), depicting the protest sites where Raza had been present in person. In "Shaheen Bagh, Delhi" we get a panoramic view of the *shamiyana* under which sit-in protests and cultural programmes were held in Shaheen Bagh. Depicted in vivid red in the foreground is the ordinary *razai*, which sustained the anti-CAA protesters during the cold nights of December 2020 and January 2021. The *razai* gives a feeling of fraternity and care and so evokes the women who led the protest. Women lend kineticism to "Tikri Border, Delhi-Haryana" as they raise their fists while travelling in a truck during the farmers' agitation in 2020-2021. Looking closely, we can see the phrase "Jai Kisaan" written on the truck. The shared *razai* reappears here: Raza's elongated figures seem to dissolve under the *razai* in a warmth quite different from the unwanted closeness of packed bodies from the train series.

In "Singhu Border, Delhi-Haryana" (2022), an elderly person sleeps in a makeshift tent. Clothes are hung everywhere, suggesting a home created faraway from home by the protesters who stayed at the borders for months on end. The life of a protester is one of displacement, but it also creates a rootedness as new bonds are forged with strangers united by the cause. Even while depicting solitude, as in this painting, Raza gestures at community, and it is among people that her work is defiantly located. □

Arushi Vats is a writer based in New Delhi.

COUNTER CULTURE

PRATHYUSH PARASURAMAN

All that glitters

The Netflix reality show Dubai Bling is a voyeuristic ode not just to a city but to a lifestyle built upon the active erasure of the very thing it fetishises—its past, its "culture".

ONE of the most poignant lessons I have learned growing up is that snaking up the ladder—in age, capital, experience, honour, popularity, or sex appeal—does not necessarily widen the scope of your freedom. As we grow, it is not so much that we become freer as we trade one kind of freedom for another. The rest of our lives are spent yearning for past freedoms while trying to explain—to others, to ourselves—what the trade-off was; that it was worth it. This is tied to the lovely illusion that our existence is naturally, incontestably bending towards something meaningful, fuller, richer, better. This capitalist utopia of eternal growth is grafted onto the way we sketch our life's trajectory. Where each day is an economic unit, one sedimenting upon another, a grand eternal crescendo, as opposed to a seamless, contextless meander.

When we were young—without capital or experience— we craned our necks towards the dreamy mirage of adulthood as a domain of untrammelled choice, a luxury, a vex-less bubble.

I remember, as a child, staring at a handsome father in the supermarket carting his child around in the shopping cart, paying for things without the boy having to ask if he could have it, thinking how wonderful that life was. That image was a trap I am still trying to extricate myself from. The mistaking of financial security as the ultimate form of freedom. Sometimes, at the end of the exhausted workday, alone, cooking, mentally listing the vegetables to be bought for the next meal, the coffee, the sugar, making sure the bills are paid, a sharp ringing plea crosses the mind. Is this all there is to it?

'POSH PEOPLE ANGST'

This lesson seems all the more ingrained in the latest cinematic genre, what film critic Anupama Chopra called "posh people angst" speaking of Zoya Akhtar's filmography, and what we are increasingly seeing on the smaller screen—through shows like *Succession*, *The Crown*, *The Gilded Age*, *The White Lotus*, *Made in Heaven*, and *Bombay Begums*. Stories of rich people agonising through life, their richness a cushion on which they weep, on which they can be eternally, glamorously vexed. But vexed, nonetheless.

Reality television, too, has thrown its ring into this fire, from *Keeping up with the Kardashians* to *Real Housewives*, from *Selling Sunset* to *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* to what I consider the most iconic, most blinkered pinnacle of this genre—*Dubai Bling*. Reality TV has always smelled of desperation, as something in which only those participated who needed to, from *Roadies* to the many million iterations of *Bigg Boss*, to the recent *Lock Upp*, where contestants were "locked up" in a fake jail waiting to be eliminated, that is, leave the jail. Becoming free was to lose.

When comedian Munawar Faruqui, who was really jailed for a joke he did not crack, was announced as one of the participants of *Lock Upp*, anchored by the right-wing-poisoned Kangana Ranaut, people were disappointed, wondering why he would go on a show that not just fetishises the prison complex but is anchored by a spokesperson of everything he stands against. Some murmured that he might need the money; after all, a lot of his shows were being cancelled by the right wing. Yes, that made sense.

But surely the rich do not need to be desperate, wanting to, as writer Jia Tolentino notes, "[enact] the various self-delusions of the emotionally immature: the dream that you are being closely watched, assessed, and categorised". False, clearly false. Money does not alter the DNA, it only gilds its loopy steps a little. Now, suddenly, you have the richest of the rich allowing cameras into their homes, allowing themselves to be filmed, willingly, enthusiastically.

To be clear, the two categories of participants are not exactly the same. The rich housewives have control over the final look of the show in a way Munawar does not in *Lock Upp* because of their proximity to the producer Karan Johar. Money allows you to produce shows where the camera is turned adoringly on you, like the recent documentary *Harry & Meghan* has shown. In some sense, this is what money allows: more editorial control over your life's representation. How does it matter though? At the end of the day, all you become is a meme on an Instagram account and that becomes the legacy of the show. The currency of popularity is still the same—controversy.

Dubai Bling cranks this voyeuristic impulse up a notch, a shameless ode not just to a city but to a lifestyle built upon the active erasure of the very thing it fetishises—its past, its "culture". The United Arab Emirates, with the world's fastest roller coaster, the biggest man-made port, the largest mall, the tallest tower, underwater rooms dipping into the sea, enormous art museum, air-conditioned bus-stops, islands constructed by carting one billion cubic feet of sand and sculpting land out of the sea, is ultimately a culture of smoke and mirrors.

Here is how architect and urbanist George Katodrytis describes the gluttony: "Dubai is a prototype of the new post-global city, which creates appetites rather than solves problems." The question is: what does this recursive, spiralling appetite mask?

Do not forget this is the country that provided refuge to Dawood Ibrahim, that allowed smuggling to build its financial bedrock, where there is no demand for transparency, in fact an active refusal of it. I still remember, in the years I lived there, how the murmur of the Arab Spring was silently but mercilessly shut down. The horror stories of migrant workers whose passports are yanked away. "In many complex and surprising ways, Dubai actually earns its living from fear," Marxist writer Mike Davis notes.

Then, there are the characters who populate *Dubai Bling*. One of the most fascinating aspects of the show is that through the multiple catfights that dot the season, the worst insult they bestow on one another is the word "fake". The worst thing you can be in this world, the absolute dregs, is to pretend to be someone you are not. The fear of being fake, of being perceived as fake runs, and ruins, their lifestyle.

> To be rich is not enough. To perform richness as effortlessly as possible is the goal.

To be rich is not enough. To perform richness as effortlessly as possible is the goal. This is where the distinction between old money and new money comes in, where the latter have progressed in pocket but still think in terms of limits.

Dubai Bling, then, looks at that trade-off I spoke of earlier—what are the freedoms you are giving up, the dignities you are swapping as you grow in wealth. This is a question old wealth never had to contend with because they had never experienced anything else. Moneyed freedom is something they were born into. It is why a Diana found it so hard to walk into The Palace, why she found it bizarre that they referred to themselves not as a family but as a "system". She was giving up a freedom that her in-laws had never experienced.

Keep in mind this is a world populated by characters who dress in the most extravagant haute couture outfits and buy emeralds worth millions of dollars after a fight with the husband. Their wealth is perverse in a city that Davis calls a "dreamworld of conspicuous consumption… bursting with architectural steroids… apocalyptic luxuries". The phallic Burj Khalifa keeps appearing in the backdrop, to imply the wealth of the location, the finest example of scale overpowering beauty.

The show hints at internal anguish but quickly papers it over with glitter and diamonds. We are not shown the labour behind the scenes, the hours that go into make-up and hair, because that would break the illusion that these folks landed in the lap of television pre-designed into perfection. At first, they seem absurd, with their demands for synthetic abs and surrogate children and being flown down in helicopters for a date, but you realise these people are also totemic of "post-global" aspirations.

In that sense, *Dubai Bling* is ideologically ambivalent, acknowledging the perverse wealth, allowing us to mock it, even as it frames it with this dream-like glow. To want the very thing you mock, to be unsure of why you are mocking something. Is it because you can never have it?

Like *The Crown*, *Dubai Bling* is unsure of itself. These shows are designed as "guilty pleasures" but in themselves they are unable to answer the basic question about what that guilt is premised on. Is it in mocking others, is it in feeling better seeing the rich but undeserving participants, in yearning for the very thing we mock, or guilt about the hypocrisy? Gucci over *gamcha* any day, right? Oh, but what will our Marxist friends think? □

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online. He also authors a newsletter on culture at prathyush.substack.com.

A chat over tikki

Under a dazzling winter moon in a DDA park in Mayur Vihar, Vishwanathji gently rebuked me by saying, “The language of your heart and soul is English, but you wander about in Hindi and Urdu.” BY **AMITABHA BAGCHI**

A LARGE ROUND MOON hung in the sky but its glow was overpowered by the market’s evening lights. I turned my gaze away from the tikkiwala’s tawa. The smell was powerful enough in itself. If I allowed it to join forces with the sight of tikkis frying in desi ghee, it would overpower my resolve. I had all but escaped when a voice called out: “Amitabha, arre bhai Amitabha! Where are you running off to?”

I turned to find Vishwanathji standing by the tawa, with a small wooden spoon clutched between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand raised in my direction. “What a coincidence!” he said. “I was planning to call you when I got home. Will you have some tikki?”

The dying embers of my willpower said no. My vocal chords emitted “Yes.”

“So,” he began, after the details of my order had been conveyed. “You have translated Muneer Niazi.”

“Only the ghazals,” I said, as if trying to diminish my offence.

“Why?” he asked.

“The nazms were too difficult to translate,” I replied.

“No, no,” he said. “I meant to ask, why did you translate any of it in the first place?”

“Umm, well, you know, it was...”

“You shouldn’t have done it. Undo it if you can.”

“Why Vishwanathji?” I asked, genuinely curious. Like any author whose book has just been published, I was hoping for praise and bracing for criticism, but not really expecting anyone to ask my book to retrace its steps and return to non-existence. “Are the translations bad?”

“How can they be any good?” he asked. “Tell me, how have you translated this one:

ghup andhere mein chhipe soone banon ki aur se
geet barkha ke suno rangon mein doobe mor se”

I wrestled my phone out of my pocket and started scanning through my email looking for the manuscript.

“Poets should remember their lines by heart,” Vishwanathji pronounced, as he scraped the last crumbs of tikki off his plate.

“I am not a poet, Vishwanathji,” I said. “I am just a translator.”

“Hmpf,” Vishwanathji said. “So, a translator is not a poet?”

“Here it is:

from the deserted dark forests come the strains
the peacock drenched in colour sings songs of the rain”

“Ha!” said Vishwanathji. “Just as I thought!”

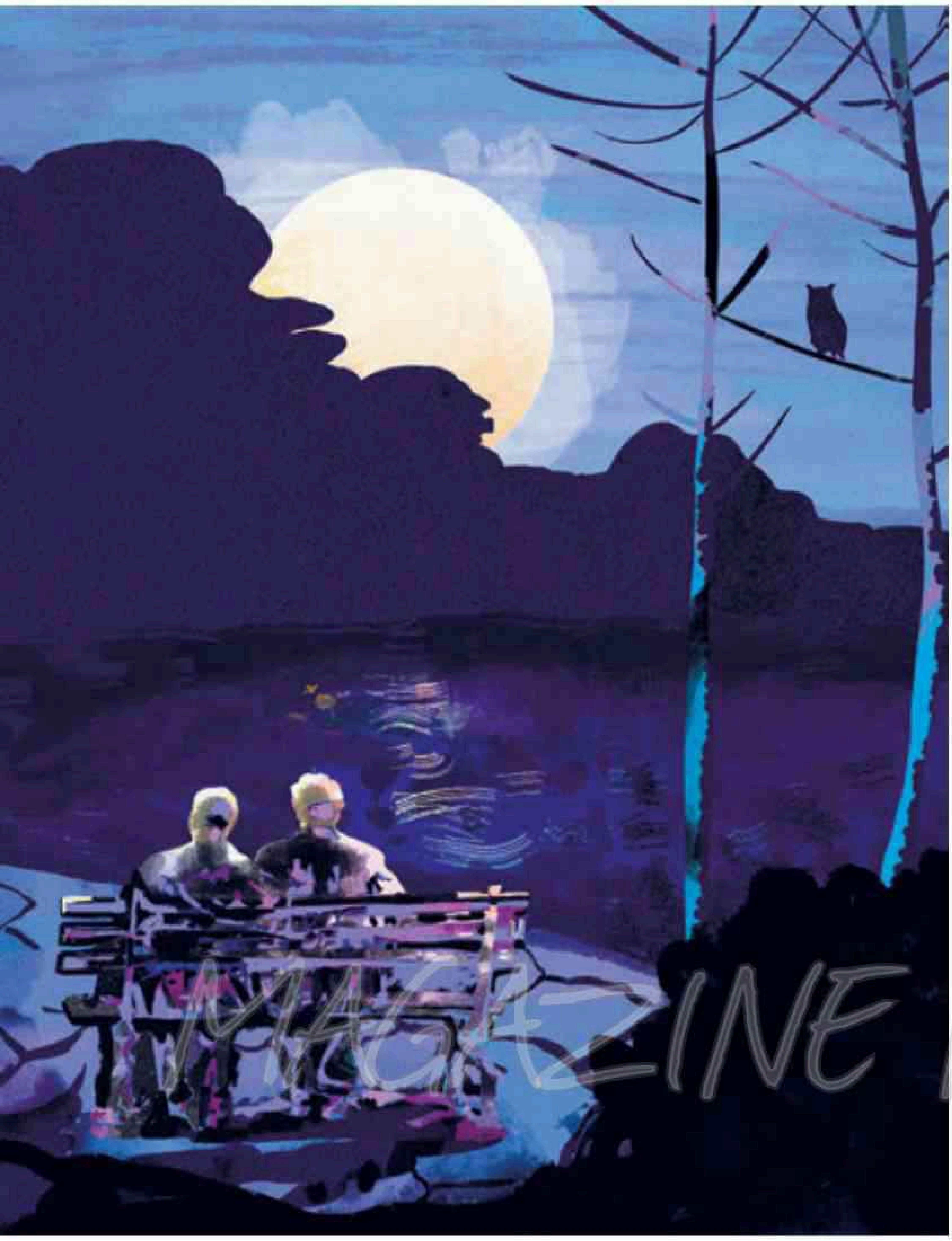
I felt my heart sink. Even the sight of a plate with my tikki, as drenched in sweet chutney as the peacock in the couplet was drenched in colour, did little to raise my mood. Nonetheless I took it. But rather than beginning to carve it, I just held it in my hand and looked askance at Vishwanathji.

“Look, Amitabha,” he said. “It is not your fault. Let’s take just one example. The word *geet* is so filled with resonance in our language. Just say it out loud and it will reach deep into the hearts of each one of these people you see around you. Someone will think of the movie *Geet Gaata Chal,* someone will remember Kareena Kapoor playing a girl called Geet in a movie. Someone else will think of something else. How can the word “strains” achieve the same effect, even in those like you who grew up speaking English?”

“But...,” I said.

“Don’t strain yourself to answer that,” he said, laughing at his poor joke as he tossed his empty plate into the garbage. “Even in England no

> I turned to find Vishwanathji standing by the tawa, with a small wooden spoon clutched between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand raised in my direction.



SIDDHARTH SENGUPTA

"EVEN THE DARKNESS is not that dark any more. The *ghup andhera* is now just an *andhera*," Vishwanathji said.

one has the kind of relationship with the word 'strain' as we have with the word *geet*."

There was really no way around this argument. I sighed and returned to the plate of tikki in my hand.

"You know," Vishwanathji said, "when we first moved here you could hear the peacocks calling day and night. That's why they named it Mayur Vihar. Now only the name is left. The peacocks have gone. Even the darkness is not that dark any more. The *ghup andhera* is now just an *andhera*."

I looked down at my phone again. My eye fell on another couplet. "There used to be an ancient sign on this shore," I read. "The current of the river washed it away."

Vishwanathji's face broke into a smile. He put an arm around me. "I met him, you know, Muneer, when he came to Delhi. I don't remember which year it was, maybe in the 1970s or 1980s. Pathans are a handsome lot, but he was exceptional. What looks! What a personality! And with a wife half his age."

"I have spoken to her on the phone many times," I said. "Naheed Begum. It was really difficult getting the contract signed. She was keen on it, but it is impossible to send either paper or money across the border."

"Yes," he said. "The only things we can send are poetry and love."

I started at this statement, an irrational fear gripping me. "Vishwanathji!"

"You are right," he said. "Such things cannot be said in public anymore. If I say it out loud, someone may arrest me. Shall we try it?"

"Try what?"

He stepped into the middle of the street, cleared his throat and said in a loud voice: "I love Pakistan because a thread of poetry connects my heart to its people."

Luckily, just as he began speaking, a Swiggy rider went roaring past and the first part of Vishwanathji's statement got drowned in the racket.

"See, nothing happened! You were scared for no reason," he said, but I could see that his breath had quickened.

Taking some money out, he handed it to the tikkiwala. Then, casting a meaningful look at my yet-to-be-emptied plate, he said: "Shall we go?"

Tossing the rest of the tikki into my mouth in one shot, I hurried to catch up with Vishwanathji, who was in an unnatural rush to get away from the scene of his crime. A couple of hundred metres away the row of shops ended and he slowed his step.

"I don't know when this darkness will give way to light," he said, catching his breath.

"When the colours of spring settled on the garden, then I saw," I replied. "When the bitterness in my heart relented, then I saw."

Recognising the original in my translation, he smiled wanly and nodded, like he had recognised an old friend who had gone bald and turned grey. "I am over 80 now, Amitabha," he said. "The bitterness in these hearts is not going to relent in my lifetime."

He walked through a wicket gate into the DDA park separating Supreme Enclave from Amar Jyoti Kunj. Seeking out a bench in the least lit part of the park, he gestured to me to sit next to him. Then he brightened up with an effort and said: "Forget these morose thoughts. I haven't even congratulated you yet on having this translation published. Very good, very good. Are you planning to publish it in Pakistan as well?"

"I sent it to a publisher there," I said. "She liked it but refused to publish it. Everyone here knows Muneer in Urdu, she said. No one will want to read an English translation."

Vishwanathji chuckled bitterly at this. "That's the difference between them and us. Here our English-speaking elite doesn't even spit on literature in Hindi."

"That's not completely true," I said, feeling affronted.

"Look, don't take it personally," he said. "Take me for example. I have published 9 or 10 novels, won various awards and what not. *Kursi ka Swayamwar* is reprinted every second year. But only two of my books are translated into English. And both by foreigners."

"Hindi-English, India-Pakistan, Indian-foreigner," I burst out. "I'm sick of politics!"

Vishwanathji raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, Vishwanathji, I didn't mean..."

"Already weary of politics?" he asked, a smile breaking over his face. "You can't even be 50 yet. But yes, now I know why you translated Muneer Niazi."

"Why?" I asked, suddenly realising that I myself didn't quite know the answer.

"Look, Amitabha," he began, and then he paused, took off his glasses and wiped them with the corner of his kurta. "How do I say this? We are all very committed to the idea that injustice must go from this world, to this idea that if we stop struggling for one moment we will betray the trust that the oppressed have placed in us. But it tires us, this struggle, and, wearied, we turn towards beauty, try to refresh ourselves with the beauty of the world. Didn't Muneer say

dasht-e-baraan ki hawaa se phir hara sa ho gaya
mein faqat khushbu se us ki tazaa-dam sa ho gaya?"

(its breeze brought me back to life, this desert rain
its fragrance was enough to make me feel new again)

> Then Vishwanathji leaned back into the bench and closed his eyes. "Look up," he said.

I bristled: "He also said
burn this stonehearted city to the ground
then scatter its ash where it can't be found"

"Good response!" Vishwanathji chuckled. "But not good enough. Faiz would have suggested that the city be torn down brick by brick and resettled under a new sky."

"Muneer is not Faiz," I said, struggling to keep my tone even.

"And that is why you love him!" Vishwanathji concluded triumphantly.

"No, no," I said, beginning to feel a little irritated now. "The reason I translated him was that I was looking for a new way of writing in English."

"What were you planning to do with this new way of writing in English when you found it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I thought I would write a novel with it."

Vishwanathji laughed harder at this than he had laughed all evening. "Very good, very good," he said, when he recovered. Then, mischievously, he asked: "So, how is the novel proceeding?"

Now, I smiled too, the smile of a schoolboy who hasn't done his homework.

"I knew it," he said. "You haven't written a word, have you?"

"No," I said.

"Listen, Amitabha," he said. "Your problem is that you don't want to choose a side. You are a writer of prose but spend your time reading poetry. The language of your heart and soul is English, but you wander about in Hindi and Urdu."

"But Vishwanathji..."

"No, no," he said. "It's not a bad thing. If everyone in the world chose a side the world would be a more impoverished place than it already is. But even dervishes have to find a place to sleep at night, my friend. Some limits should not be crossed."

"You are right, Vishwanathji," I said. "I will call my publisher and ask her if she can unpublish the book."

At this, he put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulders. Then he leaned back into the bench and closed his eyes. "Look up," he said.

Up in the sky the moon had reached the highest point in its evening's journey. The characteristic yellowness of a Delhi winter moon had given way to a sharp white that was bleeding into a dark blue.

"Tell me, Amitabha," Vishwanathji said. "How did you translate this one:

neel-e-falak ke ism mein naqsh-e-asiir ke sabab
hairat hai aab-o-khaak mein mah-e-muneer ke sabab?"

Somehow I felt like I had known all along that I would have to answer this question before the evening ended. I looked down at my phone and read:

"like a silhouette imprisoned in a sky of blue
earth and water are in awe of the brilliant moon"

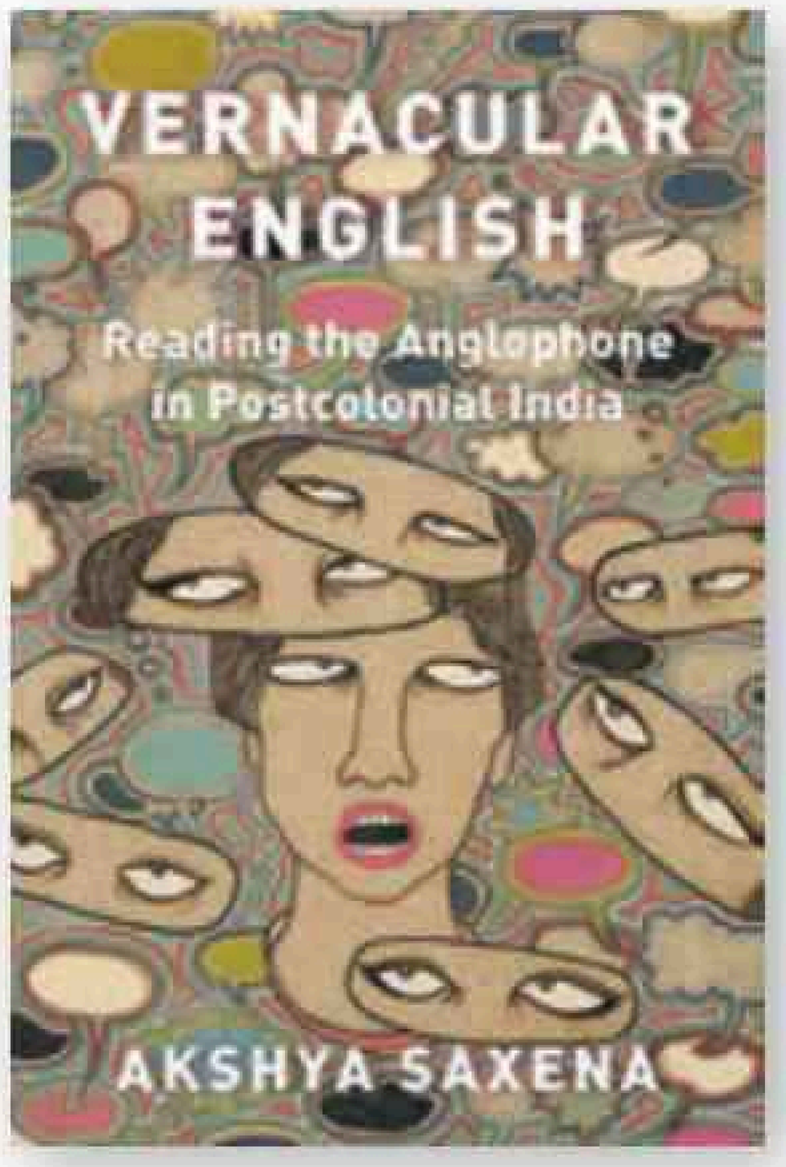
"*Dhut*!" he exclaimed. "You discarded the most valuable thing in that she'er. You discarded the poet's name."

But there was something in the way he said what he said that made me feel that he was trying to tell me that this failure was more valuable than whatever in this world passes for success. □

Amitabha Bagchi is a novelist. His recent work is Lost Paradise *(Juggernaut), a volume of translations of the ghazals of Muneer Niazi (1922-2006), a poet from Pakistan who wrote in Punjabi and Urdu. Vishwanath is a celebrated Hindi novelist from Bagchi's DSC Prize-winning novel,* Half the Night is Gone (2018).

Quixotic misadventure

This book argues that English is now a vernacular language of India rather than the language of dominance and aspiration it is commonly seen to be, but fails to make a persuasive case. BY **HARISH TRIVEDI**



Vernacular English
Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India
By Akshya Saxena
Princeton University Press
Pages: 206
Price: $95

THIS book argues that English is now a/the vernacular language of India rather than being the language of command, dominance, oppression, and aspiration that it is commonly seen to be. It is a tough ask to make out a persuasive case for a hypothesis so hugely counter-intuitive, as we now say politely for something that utterly flouts common sense. But Akshya Saxena plots her argument with pragmatic and even shrewd strategy and articulates it with not only collateral erudition, which is sometimes barely relevant, but also with spirit and even bravado.

She begins dramatically by contrasting two widely unlike figures—Rohith Vemula, the research scholar at Hyderabad who committed suicide in 2016, and Narendra Modi, who is evoked here as having once worn an outrageously expensive suit that had his name woven into its fine stripes in the roman script; this was when he welcomed President Obama on his visit to India in 2015. Together, she says, these two events "exemplify the life of English in postcolonial India".

Saxena informs us that in his English-language suicide note, "Vemula saw English as the language of Dalit leaders like B.R. Ambedkar and not of British colonialism" (page xiii). But this seems to be a wishful over-reading of a text Saxena does not directly cite. For nowhere in his 589-word note does Vemula mention anything like British colonialism, and though he does conclude with "Jai Bheem", he does not name Ambedkar or any other Dalit leader or their preference for English.

As for Modi, Saxena handles him with similar dexterity. She acknowledges that when Modi sat down to hold talks with Obama still wearing that scandalous suit, he spoke not in English but in Hindi, using an interpreter. But she cites another occasion when he used phrases in Hindi and Sanskrit and then translated them into English and thus, in her view, "yoked English to a Hindu idea of India". She seems to have forgotten that just a paragraph earlier, she had asserted that for Modi, "The equation is almost mathematical—Hindu nationalism = Hindi" (page xiv).

Saxena is obviously attempting to steer her determined course amidst swirling cross-currents and a vortex of her own making. What makes her enterprise the more remarkable to witness is that she herself realises right from the start that her argument, beyond its one-line novelty, is a non-starter: "If there is a contradiction in the book's title," she tells us with Whitmanesque aplomb, "it is intentional" (page 7).

She takes note of a large number of previous scholarly studies all of which use the term "vernacular" in the Indian context to mean the "lesser-known and actively marginalised languages, cultures and narratives" (page 10)—and not English. She even makes a candid confession, except that she makes it sound like a proud and heroic boast: "When I presented early iterations of my argument, I received one consistent feedback: drop the 'vernacular'!" (page 12) To adapt a once-popular poem: The girl stood on the burning deck/whence all but she had fled.

ENGLISH VS HINDI

One's interest in reading the rest of the book is thus twofold, for one is curious to see not only what kind of argument Saxena constructs but equally just what kind of sources and materials she is be able to marshal in support. In Chapter 1, she equates English with the foremost vernacular, Hindi, and even alleges an "alliance" between them, as both of them were proclaimed to be the official languages of India, overlooking the fact that this made them the arch adversaries of each other.

The two languages are indeed engaged in mortal combat in a little-known collection of essays or "petitions" she cites titled *India Demands English* (1960), edited and self-published by one Isaac Mathai. This was part of a concerted campaign spearheaded mainly by Tamil speakers to block Hindi from being adopted as the sole official language in 1965, at the end of the 15-year transition period for phasing out English as provided in the Constitution.

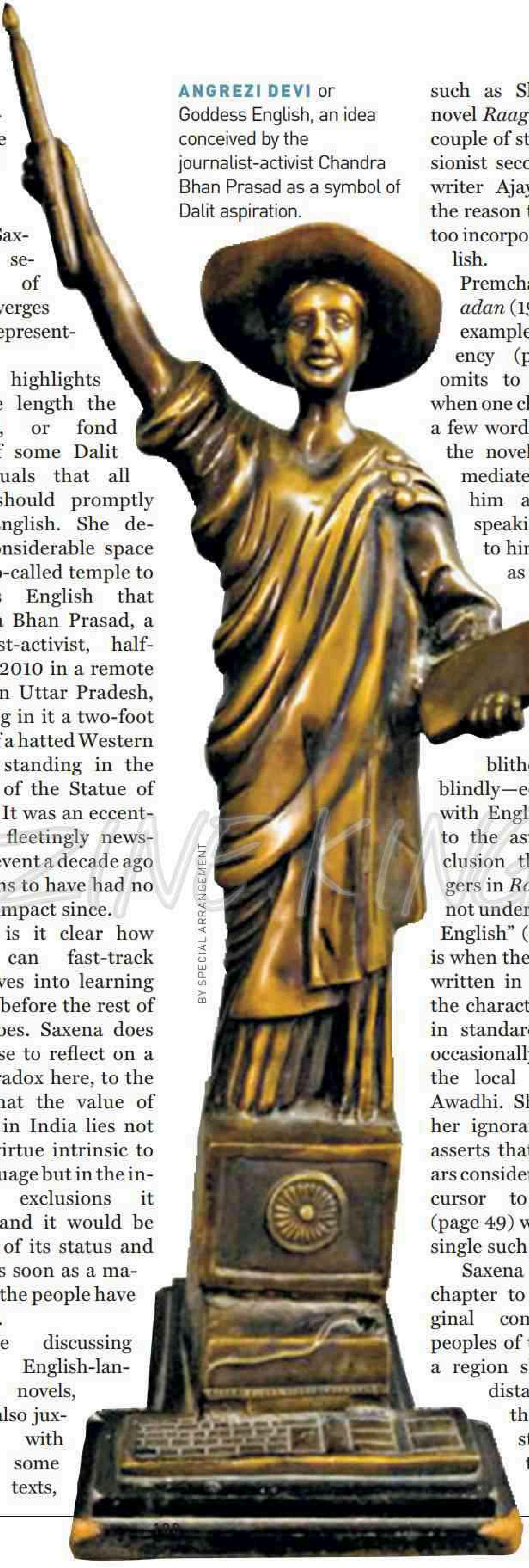
The supporters of English in this book were, as Saxena notes, the privileged, who wished "to ensure their elitism as an English-knowing caste and class minority" (page 41). Thus, English does not come out of this episode as a vernacular but just the opposite. In fact, the full title of this book, which Saxena omits to mention, shows it to be not the voice of a nation but largely the views of one privileged individual, an Indian knight in English armour: *India Demands English: The Speeches and Writings of C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer [and others].*

THE LANGUAGE OF DALIT DISCOURSE?

In the next two chapters, Saxena focusses again on a tiny and unrepresentative minority group, Indian writers in English who are Dalit or who have written about Dalits like Mulk Raj Anand. But this leaves out of her discourse the major Dalit writers of the last half century who have written not in English but in a subaltern vernacular like Marathi or Hindi. Again, Saxena's selectivity of focus verges on misrepresentation.

She highlights at some length the demand, or fond wish, of some Dalit intellectuals that all Dalits should promptly learn English. She devotes considerable space to the so-called temple to Goddess English that Chandra Bhan Prasad, a journalist-activist, half-built in 2010 in a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, installing in it a two-foot statue of a hatted Western woman standing in the posture of the Statue of Liberty. It was an eccentric and fleetingly newsworthy event a decade ago but seems to have had no serious impact since.

Nor is it clear how Dalits can fast-track themselves into learning English before the rest of India does. Saxena does not pause to reflect on a vital paradox here, to the effect that the value of English in India lies not in any virtue intrinsic to the language but in the invidious exclusions it makes, and it would be drained of its status and power as soon as a majority of the people have learnt it.



ANGREZI DEVI or Goddess English, an idea conceived by the journalist-activist Chandra Bhan Prasad as a symbol of Dalit aspiration.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While discussing mainly English-language novels, Saxena also juxtaposes with them some Hindi texts, such as Shrilal Shukla's novel *Raag Darbari* and a couple of stories by a revisionist second-wave Dalit writer Ajay Navaria, for the reason that these texts too incorporate some English. She names Premchand's *Sevasadan* (1919) as an early example of this tendency (page 87) but omits to mention that when one character speaks a few words in English in the novel, another immediately reproves him and says that speaking in English is to him as disgusting as putting on clothes cast-off by the British.

As for Shukla, Saxena again blithely—and blindly—equates Hindi with English and comes to the astounding conclusion that "the villagers in *Raag Darbari* do not understand Hindi or English" (page 56). This is when the entire novel is written in Hindi and all the characters in it speak in standard Hindi, only occasionally resorting to the local dialect of it, Awadhi. She compounds her ignorance when she asserts that "many scholars consider Awadhi a precursor to Hindustani" (page 49) without citing a single such scholar.

Saxena devotes a chapter to another marginal community, the peoples of the north-east, a region she clubs with distant Kashmir for the reason as stated by her that both the areas "have been under military occupation by the Indian state for as long as India has been independent" (page 128). Evidently, the issues she wishes to deal with here are not primarily to do with language, but she finds a connection in a banner displayed by some women in 2004 in a defiant demonstration after a rape of a local woman by an army man. The banner said in English "Indian Army Rape Us" and was displayed by 12 women who paraded naked in stark protest. As Saxena notes, only one of the 12 women who made this protest knew English and could read what the banner said (131).

A STILL from Slumdog Millionaire (2008), in which the slum boys begin with just a few common words of English, but then suddenly begin to speak a correct and "impeccably accented" variety of it, apparently for the benefit of its foreign audience.

'UNFORGIVABLY UNREALISTIC'

It is not as if Saxena's supreme confidence in the validity of her argument is never dented by the evidence to the contrary which meets her at every step. In her last chapter, she takes up some instances of people who deal in English or even speak it in films and novels without being able to read it. At a traffic light in Delhi, she asks a vendor of pirated English books whether he himself reads any of the books he sells. He answers in Hindi, "Now how can we read them?"—a response that "made my question seem foolish" (page 149).

In the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the slum boys begin with just a few common words of English, but then suddenly begin to speak a correct and "impeccably accented" variety of it, apparently for the benefit of its foreign audience. Saxena finds this "unbelievable" and "unforgivably unrealistic" (page 163). But realisation still does not dawn on her that her own project in this book could be similarly described.

Nor is her scholarly credibility bolstered by the elementary errors strewn all over her text. The name Shrilal Shukla is always so spelt in the roman script and not as "Srilal Sukla" (pages 26; 45-46). Macaulay addressed his "Minute" on Indian education not to the British Parliament but to the Governor General in Calcutta who was his immediate boss (page 75). Rumi is not an Urdu poet (page 120); he lived in Persia and wrote in Persian when Urdu was not yet born in India. And "Dalit" literally means not "scattered" (page 181) but crushed, ground, or trodden and trampled on. The Princeton University Press did not pick up any of these errors either; it is, as Kabir put it, the blind leading the blind.

Finally, one wonders what motivated Saxena to undertake this Quixotic academic misadventure. Perhaps the idea that English had spread everywhere in India down to the level of the most deprived people sounded radically new and desirable to her American cohorts, regardless of whether it was at all verifiable on the ground. Rather more plausible and potentially rich was a related area in which Saxena had previously published a paper (perhaps while she was still in India) in a volume of essays titled *Indian English and 'Vernacular' India* (eds. Makarand Paranjape and G.J.V. Prasad, 2010); in it she had looked into the blatant or subtle ways in which English had inflected and hybridised the use of Hindi, especially in the media. But to pursue that investigation further may have been a project so worthy as to be quite unstartling and dull. ☐

Harish Trivedi taught English in the University of Delhi.

> The value of English in India lies not in any virtue intrinsic to the language but in the invidious exclusions it makes, and it will be drained of its status and power as soon as a majority of the people have learnt it.

Dude-wala Hinglish

A book about how the commingling of English and Hindi in a globalised world opens up spaces, undermines linguistic elitisms, and makes the gatekeepers uncomfortable.

BY **G.J.V. PRASAD**

RECENTLY Daisy Rockwell, the translator of Geetanjali Shree's International Booker Prize-winning novel *Ret Samadhi*, asked on social media about the acceptability of the word "dude" among speakers of Hindi and other Indian languages. The overwhelming response was that "dude" was quite common among younger urban Hindi speakers. I may add that "bro" has such acceptability in many Indian languages, especially Thamizh. It seems a given that popular slang and expressions from the Anglophone world will enter various Indian languages (especially in urban areas, though not restricted to them) spoken by Indians.

This seems quite promiscuous to language puritans, especially the entry of English words where equivalents exist in the Indian language. Language mixing by Indians and the growth of Hinglish, which is the mixing of English in Hindi (though this is also used to refer to English which has Hindi words thrown in), are the subject of *Hinglish Live: Language Mixing Across Media*, edited by Francesca Orsini and Ravikant.

SWAG
HINGLISH
लाइव LIVE
Language mixing across media
EDITED BY
FRANCESCA ORSINI
RAVIKANT

Hinglish Live
Language mixing across media
Edited by Francesca Orsini & Ravikant
Orient BlackSwan
Pages: 372
Price: Rs.1,295

To make things clear, this is not the same thing as the Indianisation of English—not the mixing of words and expressions from Indian languages into the English spoken and written by us, not our lathi-charge on English to make it behave, to be governed by us. While we can and do make structural changes to English, it is in the wholescale borrowing from our languages that makes this Indian, makes the language ours.

While this may not be fully intelligible to native English speakers (or for that matter non-native but foreign English speakers), it may not be intelligible even to fellow-Indians if the English is heavily nativised by one of our numerous languages that are rooted in the various parts of our country. At the moment, Hindi mixed in English, or what we used to call Hinglish once upon a time, has more pan-Indian acceptability and intelligibility than others.

There have been numerous studies of such Indianisation of English by literary writers (think Shobhaa De, Salman Rushdie), journalists (beginning with Shobhaa De and film magazines), and ordinary speakers (think you and me). That it could not be but so—that words and concepts from Indian languages would have to enter the English written and spoken in India—would become apparent if we just thought about it for a moment.

CHUTNEFYING ENGLISH

However, Hinglish now refers to our languages (especially Hindi) after the entry of English in them. This penetration of English words and phrases into Indian languages, and the resultant Hinglish, has intrigued scholars for a while. The book *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*, edited by Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell (Penguin, 2011), resulted from a conference on the theme in January 2009.

Held in Mumbai, the capital of the Hindi film world that gave us movie titles like *Jab We Met* (2007), the conference had many participants from the media, quite a few of whom contributed to the book as well. The contributors from the world of cinema, radio, and TV included Mahesh Bhatt, Gulzar, Nandita Das, Prasoon Joshi, Prashant Panday, Cyrus Broacha, and Kandaswamy Bharathan. Screenplay writer and academic Shuchi Kothari as well as advertising and marketing professionals like Atul Tandan, Soumik Pal,

MAGZINE KING

> Is English a predator that will destroy our languages from within, or is it like a probiotic that grows good bacteria in the gut for the well-being of our linguistic digestive systems to consume and represent this new world?

Siddharth Mishra, and Rahul Kansal were also among the contributors. I mention their names to show that professionals in the media have been aware of the impact of English on Indian languages for quite a while now, as have scholars who study the media and our various linguistic cultures.

Professor Harish Trivedi pointed attention to a ghazal written in 1887 by Ayodhya Prasad Khatri (1857-1905) to show how (even if for comic/satiric purpose) English had entered the language of some Hindi speakers:

Rent Law ka gham karen ya Bill of Income Tax ka?
Kya karen apna nahiin hai sense right now-a-days.
... Darkness chaaya hua hai Hind mein chaaro taraf
Naam ki bhi hai nahiin baaqi na light now-a-days.

How well the poet shows the impact of English during British rule—new laws, new concepts, new social realities led to this entry of the English language into Hindi and other Indian languages. The poet may have been laughing at this, even if decrying it, but this is very much a reality now, this mixing of English and Indian languages in this new globalised world of Indian economic liberalisation.

Hinglish (and the commingling of English in other Indian languages) is a result of this market space, of the new consumerism that constructs and caters to our aspirational needs. It opens up spaces, it undermines linguistic elitisms and makes the horrified gatekeepers very uncomfortable and vulnerable. Is English a predator that will destroy our languages from within, or is it like a probiotic that grows good bacteria in the gut for the well-being of our linguistic digestive systems to consume and represent this new world? Are we seeing a creolisation that is fatal to our languages or are we seeing our languages strengthening themselves, taking English in their confident embrace?

THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISEMENTS

It is but natural that the language of the market would first be naturalised in the world of advertisement. Santosh Desai said in the 2009 conference that Hinglish allowed the breakdown of boundaries between the worlds of English and Hindi speakers. He saw it as reflecting and helping in the democratisation of various spaces. In this book, he has a chapter where he shows us how Hinglish entered the offices of advertisement agencies, breaking the boundaries between the English copywriter and the Hindi translator and captured the aspirational world of the new consumer. As we know, Amul butter advertisements have used interlingual puns for a very long time. And we are big at this as a people. Even the title of this piece attempts at a poor pun across English and Hindi. Santosh Desai gives us a personal history of this movement towards Hinglish in advertisements and asserts that it was Pepsi that established the coolness quotient of Hinglish.

This coolness of Hinglish is emphasised by other contributors to the two volumes, especially the second. It is seen as the language of the youth—thus cautioning us that we should not take Hinglish to be a language but a set of evolving/changing practices, of using words that have currency in the Indian language that people are speaking.

The first essay, by Ratnakar Tripathy, is titled "Why Hinglish is a Process not a Language". This may be reflected in written literature—we have the example of best-selling Hinglish novels—but all that it means is that they are not written in pure Hindi and the writer makes choices to make the novel accessible to non-traditional Hindi readers (you can see this happening with the other side as well—with writers publishing novels written in English pollinated by Hindi and words from other Indian languages, not even grammatically correct at times, just to make it accessible to first-time readers).

What I liked about *Hinglish Live* is that all contributors seem aware of *Chutnefying English* and take the discussion and exploration of the phenomenon forward—they are less inclined to be judgemental (not that all contributors to the earlier book were that), and their articles focus clearly on the practice, their ears are clearly pressed to the ground. They show what we mean when we say we are like that only but show up our linguistic jugaads in the media, in the world of publishing, in cinema (a clutch of very interesting articles focus on this), in the classroom, and in other spaces. As scholars, they attempt to theorise about this rather than just describe it but it still works for any of us interested in this phenomenon called Hinglish.

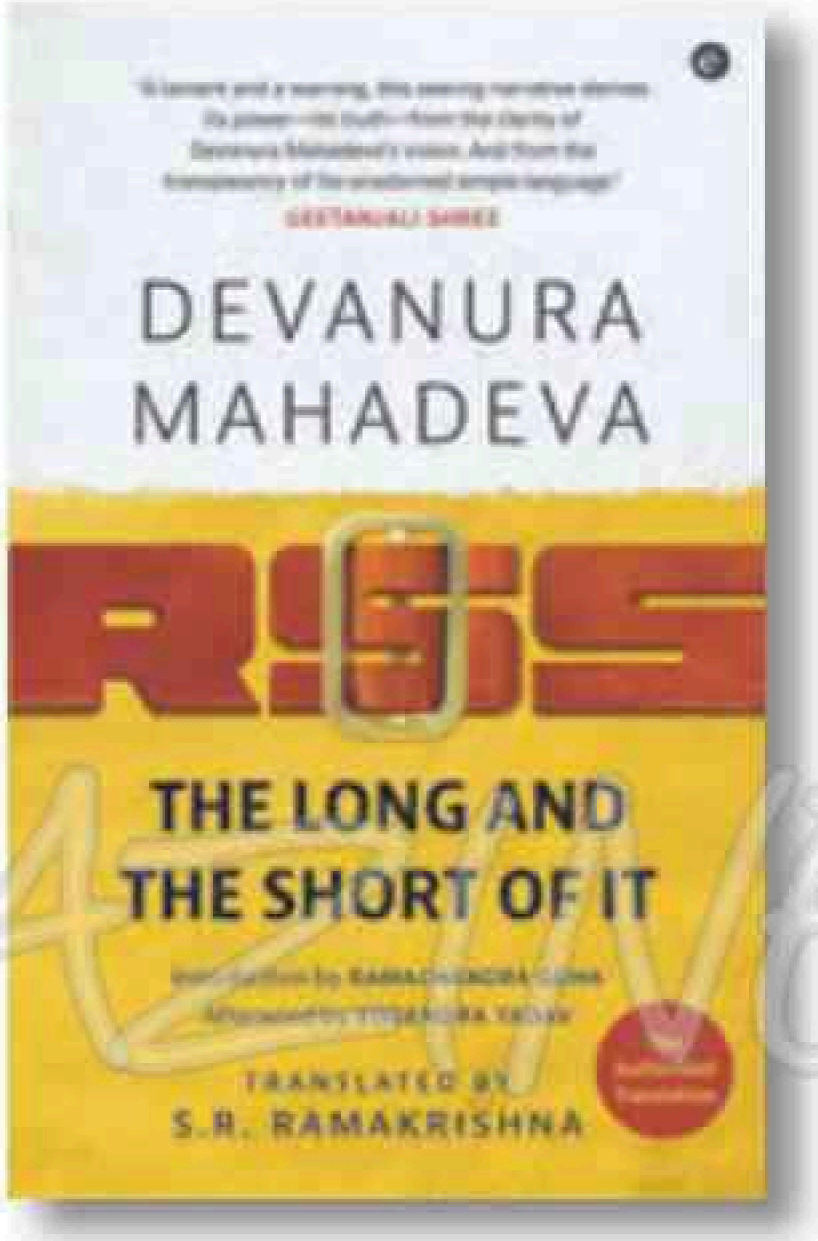
The two books together make a formidable pair—they push at our mental boundaries, force us to look at our language practice, show us how we are implicated in various hierarchical structures, and help us ask questions of ourselves. Do they give us answers? *Arre*, you want a *kunji*? Just read the books, *yaar*, *machi*, whatever! □

G.J.V. Prasad, formerly Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, is a poet, novelist, and translator.

Exploring the Sangh

In this important intellectual attack on the times we are going through, the author attempts to understand the RSS and what it wants by interpreting Hindutva's primary texts. BY **AAKAR PATEL**

THE BJP is India's largest political force, but its ideology is not properly understood. Some aspects of it—the opposition to dynasty, the promise of economic development—are clear even though the party may not adhere to them fully. The largest component of the ideology, what is called Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, is more vague. What does it mean and what is it intended to achieve?



RSS
The Long and the Short of It
By Devanura Mahadeva
Translated from the Kannada by S.R. Ramakrishna
Eka, 2022
Pages: 114
Price: Rs.199

Devanura Mahadeva, a writer from Karnataka, explores this with his work on the RSS, the parent body of the BJP. The party was founded in 1951 after the RSS came under attack following Mahatma Gandhi's murder. Its leader and many of his followers were jailed and the organisation was banned.

POLITICAL PROTECTION

It determined that it required political protection to operate and entered electoral politics by forming the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). Until 1980, the party, including all of its top leadership, was essentially staffed by RSS cadre. In 1980, after it demerged from the umbrella opposition Janata Party, A.B. Vajpayee renamed the BJS and opened the BJP to non-RSS individuals. The link with the RSS and the ideology remains, and its top leadership, including the Prime Minister, who was a pracharak, continues to come from members of the Sangh.

Mahadeva attempts to understand what the RSS is and what it wants through the simple device of reading Hindutva's primary texts. These are V.D. Savarkar's works and M.S. Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts*. The writer describes his motivation to do this through a parable.

A sorcerer who spread turmoil was invincible because his life was stored in a parrot in a distant cave. He thus remained untouched by action against his own person. The only way to get at him was to go after this life-soul in that hidden parrot. Mahadeva thus goes on this quest to see what lies behind Hindutva.

In his encounter with Golwalkar, he finds that the RSS head worshipped caste and asked that the rest of us worship it. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar says that the Hindu people are his god and this god manifests itself through caste. Meaning the organisation of Hindu society in the way Manu described it (Brahmin head, Kshatriya arms, Vaishya thighs, and Shudra feet) is the entity that is worthy of worship. In 1960, Golwalkar said that caste could be used for cross-breeding superior humans, like it is done for animals. This was done by Hindus earlier, through Namboodiri Brahmin men marrying outside the caste.

It was also done, he said, through Namboodiri men fathering the first child of a woman married to someone else. It may interest readers to know that Europe in the feudal period may have had something similar called *droit du seigneur* ("right of the lord"), which allowed feudal lords to have sexual relations with subordinate women on their wedding night. That this is straight exploitation of the weak and the marginalised and not some noble thing does not appear to have occurred to Golwalkar.

If such things are not pushed forth by the RSS cadre or the BJP, it is not because these statements have been withdrawn but because they are likely confident that few people will do what the author has done and actually read the primary texts. It would be interesting to see a television debate today around whether or not the caste system should be worshipped and ossified as the

RSS wants it to be.

Mahadeva makes a number of original observations. He says that the RSS has defanged the religions that sprang out of India but rejected the caste that he wants worshipped. “The RSS tries to pull out the teeth and nails of Jaina, Bouddha, Sikh, Lingayat and other dharmas that were born in India and rejected the Chaturvarna order.” The mere act of calling these Hindu faiths is an attempt to subsume them.

There is no resistance to this internally, Mahadeva writes, because the RSS in fact does not encourage thinking. Of the title *Bunch of Thoughts* itself, he says that there is not much thinking in the work, only a series of “random, dangerous beliefs and that too from a bygone age”. Thinking is discouraged in the RSS through the insistence on order over diversity.

PTI

DURING AN RSS FUNCTION in Nagpur, Maharashtra, on December 8. Thinking is discouraged in the RSS through the insistence on order over diversity.

The RSS “tames” its volunteers, Mahadeva writes and quotes Golwalkar as saying that they must “Do what is told.... If told to play kabaddi play kabaddi, told to hold meeting then meeting.... Their discretion is not required.”

Among the things that this cadre is taught is that the Constitution is flawed. The RSS, and this is true even of the work of Deendayal Upadhyaya, the man who would later head the Jana Sangh, has always attacked federalism. The very idea of States is offensive to them because there can be only one Bharat Mata, and the existence of a Tamil Nadu or Gujarat or Bengal is wrong. Mahadeva links this to the goods and services tax, which has taken away or severely limited the rights of States to raise their own revenues.

> **Among the things that the RSS cadre is taught is that the Constitution is flawed.**

A ‘COW-FACED TIGER’

The stress on homogeneity over diversity shows, the author writes, in such things as nomenclature. The RSS and the BJP refer to Adivasis as *vanvasis* (forest dwellers), thus eroding their indigenous identity. Mahadeva calls Hindutva a “cow-faced tiger”, an entity that is eating at Indian society from within. The Prime Minister he says is popular but is only an “*utsava murti*”, a replica of the main idol which is led out in a procession. “The real deity sits in Nagpur, inside the RSS shrine.” The only qualifications required of the *utsava murti* are the ability to put up a show and mesmerise the people. Mahadeva asks: “[D]on’t we see all of this today?”

What does he offer as a solution? He gives the example of a village that is overrun by thieves.

“Firstly, the entire town wakes up. At night the youth take turns patrolling and keeping watch in the mohallas. Women carry chilli powder with them. This is the kind of... awakening and vigil we all need. Because these thieves can come in different guises; they may come for temple maintenance for instance. Fake news can be spread. Hymn singing can be organised. The only way out is to first uncover the plot. This requires us to be vigilant. Further, at least now, the sane voices which are a scattered few need to speak up about right and wrong. Words like love, tolerance, justice need to be heard from within our society.”

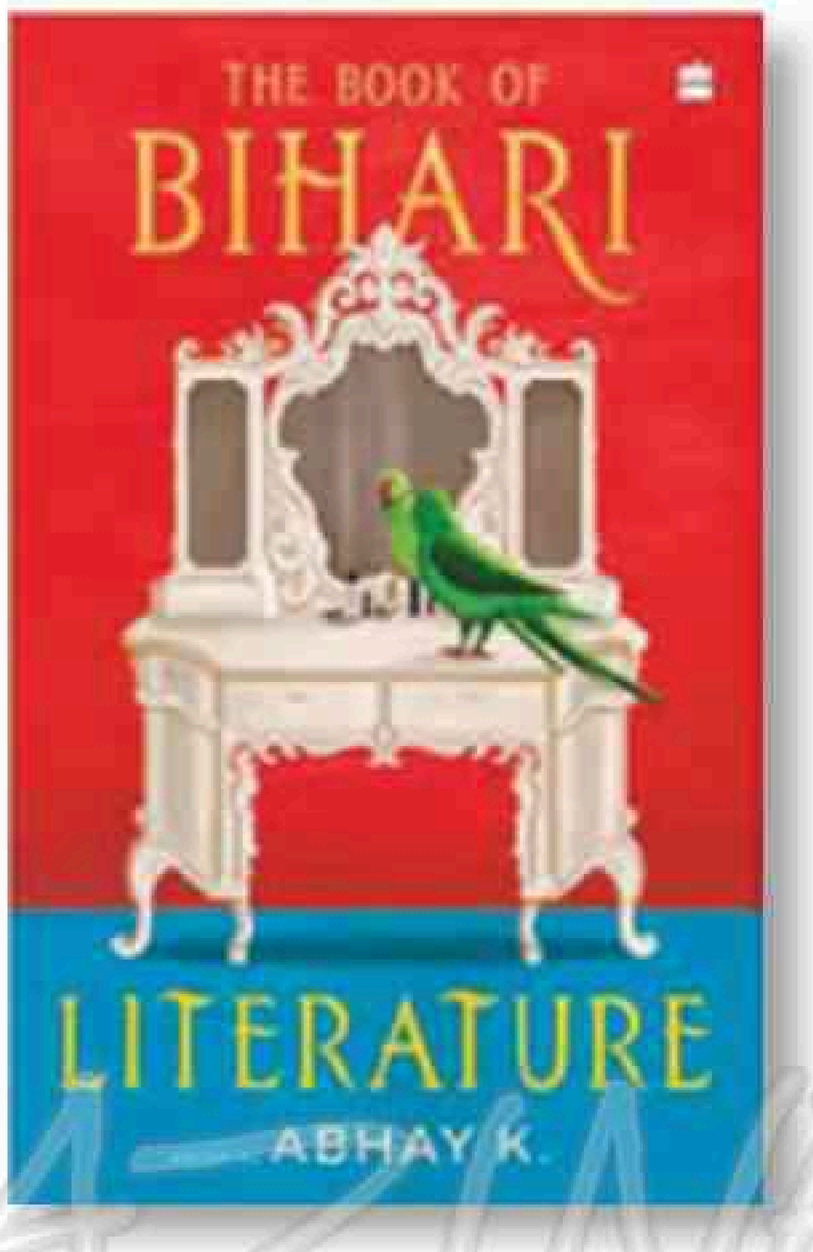
Mahadeva’s work was originally published as *RSS: Depth and Breadth*, and he encouraged people to distribute it widely and even republish it on their own if they wished to do so.

The version being reviewed includes two essays, by Ramachandra Guha and Yogendra Yadav. The intellectual content of books is sometimes judged by how long they are. Mahadeva himself refers to his work as a “booklet”, and Guha speaks of it in his essay as a “pamphlet”. Let these descriptions not mislead the potential reader. This is a first-rate work. It is an important intellectual attack on the times we are going through and for that reason has become popular. ☐

Aakar Patel is a senior journalist and columnist. His most recent book is The Anarchist Cookbook: A Toolkit to Protest and Peaceful Resistance.

A taste of Bihar

Bihar has an astounding literary output, much of which goes unappreciated because it is in the regional languages. This valuable anthology presents some of it in translation. BY **ABDULLAH KHAN**



The Book of Bihari Literature
Edited by
Abhay K.
HarperCollins
Pages: 408
Price: Rs.699

BIHAR'S literary legacy goes back by more than 2,000 years. *Therigatha* (Hymns of the Elder Nuns), an anthology of poems in Pali, was composed between the sixth and third century BCE. One of the oldest examples of women's writing, it offers rare insight into the lives of women in ancient India. Subsequently, in addition to Pali, which was the language of Buddhist treatises, Prakrit and Sanskrit were also used as the languages of religious and literary texts during the first millennium.

Later, Bihar had literary luminaries who wrote not only in Urdu, Hindi, English, and Persian, the *lingua francas* of their time, but also in local languages such as Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili, Bajjika, and Angika.

Unfortunately, very few people outside Bihar are aware of the literary heritage of the State as most of the materials are not available in translation. *The Book of Bihari Literature* goes a long way in bridging this gap. Poet, translator, and diplomat Abhay K. must be congratulated for bringing together this distinguished collection. He has not only edited this volume but also translated many of the featured poems, from his mother tongue Magahi as well as from Sanskrit, Pali, Maithili, and so on.

In the Editor's Note, Abhay writes about Bihar's culture, languages, and literary traditions. He links it to his personal journey to discover his true linguistic identity and in the process gives a mini masterclass on the linguistic traditions of Bihar.

Two poems by Mutta and Sumangalmata, Buddhist nuns from the sixth century BCE, open the collection. The verses are beautiful and melodic and still relevant, considering they speak about women's lib. Here is the poem by Mutta:

Free, fabulously free,
Free from three trifles—
Pounder, pounding bowl
and my wicked lord—
Free from endless births
and deaths,
the chains that fettered me
down
Are suddenly no more.

"Peace at last" by Sumangalmata echoes the sentiment. Translated by Abhay and Gabriel Rosenstock, these verses could have been by a modern-day feminist poet.

When it comes to Sanskrit, two popular writers from Pataliputra (as Patna was once known as), Kautilya and Vatsyayana, are selected. In the excerpt from *Chanakya Niti,* a collection of aphorisms, Kautilya reflects on friendship and familial bonds while Vatsyayana teaches the art of kissing and love bites with poetic fervour in an excerpt from *Kamasutra.*

AUTHENTIC RING

It might surprise many to know that the first Indian to write a book in English was not from West Bengal or Kerala but from Patna. Sheikh Deen Mohammad or Sake Dean Mahomet published his first book, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet,* in 1794 in England. Born in Patna in 1759, he worked for the East India Company before migrating to Ireland and settling down in England with his Irish wife. Written in epistolary form, the book describes his travels in 1770-1775 as part of the Bengal regiment as it moved in the northern and eastern parts of India. The excerpt from the book makes for an interesting read.

Like Deen Mohammad, Tabish Khair, a contemporary fiction writer and poet, has migrated to Europe now, but his novels are rooted in Indian culture. The featured fictional piece here called "The Scam" is about an alleged caste atrocity in Bihar. Born and brought up in Gaya, Khair is familiar with the workings of caste dynamics in Bihar, and this gives his story an authentic ring.

The best part of this anthology is the fact that the editor gives literature in Bihar's five native languages ample space, thus making a pointed statement against the branding

RANJEET KUMAR

MUSTARD FIELDS at Biswak village in Nalanda district, Bihar. The renowned *mahavihara* of Magadha, considered among the greatest centres of learning in the ancient world, is located in this district.

of languages like Bhojpuri and Magahi as inferior dialects. The poems of two Bhojpuri stalwarts, Bhikhari Thakur and Mahendar Misir, offer a real taste of Bihar. Another Bhojpuri poem that stands out is "The untouchable's complaint" (*"Acchut kee Shiqayat"*) by Heera Dom, who is probably India's first Dalit poet. Born in Danapur near Patna, Heera Dom published the poem in the well-respected *Saraswati* magazine in 1914, a big feat for him in those days.

There are short stories in Maithili besides love poems by the legendary Vidyapati. I wish Abhay had included some of Vidyapati's devotional verses and *barahmasas* (sad songs of separation) to give readers a fair idea of the greatness of this 15th century poet who was known as Maithil Kavi Kokil (the poet cuckoo of Maithili).

ASTUTE STUDIES

The Magahi language is represented by eight pieces of poetry and prose, out of which a story, "Chilled to bone" by Mithilesh, and two poems, "The night of full moon" by Surendra Prasad Tarun and "Bereavement" by R. Ishari Arshad, stand out. Abhay and Asif Jalal have translated them superbly, effectively capturing Bihari idioms and nuances of local culture. I especially loved the way they have left some Magahi words untranslated: for example, using *borsi* in place of "firepot".

Since Hindi is the official language of Bihar, it gets the lion's share in this anthology with 20 pieces. Master poets like Ramdhari Singh "Dinkar" (presented here is a selection from the third canto of *Rashmirathi*, an epic centred on Karna from the *Mahabharata*) and Baba Nagaarjun (his famous poem "Famine and After" is included in its entirety) rub shoulders with contemporary voices like Anamika ("Amrapali"), Arun Kamal ("The city of Gaya"), and Alok Dhanwa ("Girls on rooftops"). When it comes to fiction, we have popular names like Rambriksh Benipuri, Acharya Shivpujan Sahay, Usha Kiran Khan, and Ratneshwar.

And we have Phanishwar Nath Renu with his story "The messenger", an astute study of rural Bihar with multi-layered characters and a surprising climax. Renu's style can be compared to those of Chekhov and O. Henry. Given the way Renu has made extensive use of regional dialects, the excellent translation by Rakshanda Jalil is a feat. However, it might have been better if instead of "The messenger", the editor had included Renu's most loved stories like *"Maare gaye gulfam"*, which was adapted into a 1966 film, *Teesri Kasam*, or "Panchlight". To pique the interest of readers who have not read Renu so far, his best stories should have been offered.

> It might surprise many to know that the first Indian to write a book in English was not from West Bengal or Kerala but from Patna.

Urdu is the second official language of Bihar and is taught in many government schools and colleges. But the literary output in Urdu is less than that in Hindi, perhaps because Urdu is no longer a language of employment. Only one poet and four fiction writers in Urdu are included here. Of them, Shamoil Ahmad's Kafkaesque story, "The dressing table", is the most interesting. During a riot, Brijmohan, the protagonist, loots a dressing table from a prostitute, Naseem Jaan, and brings it home. The dressing table seems to have magical powers, which transform his daughters and wife into courtesans and Brijmohan into a pimp. Reading the story is like watching a movie, so deftly are the characters and situations sketched.

The only Urdu poet who finds a space is Bedil Azimabadi, with three of his couplets. I was surprised that two towering personalities of Urdu poetry from Bihar, Shad Azimabadi and Jameel Mazhari, did not make it to this anthology.

I hope there is a sequel where the authors and poets who could not be included in this volume find a place. ☐

Abdullah Khan is a Mumbai-based novelist, screenwriter, literary critic, and banker. His novel Patna Blues *has been translated into 10 languages.*

Sex, lies, and chicken curry

Racy but insightful, action-packed but convincing, this is a potboiler with a difference that deserves a lot of sequels. BY **ADITYA SINHA**

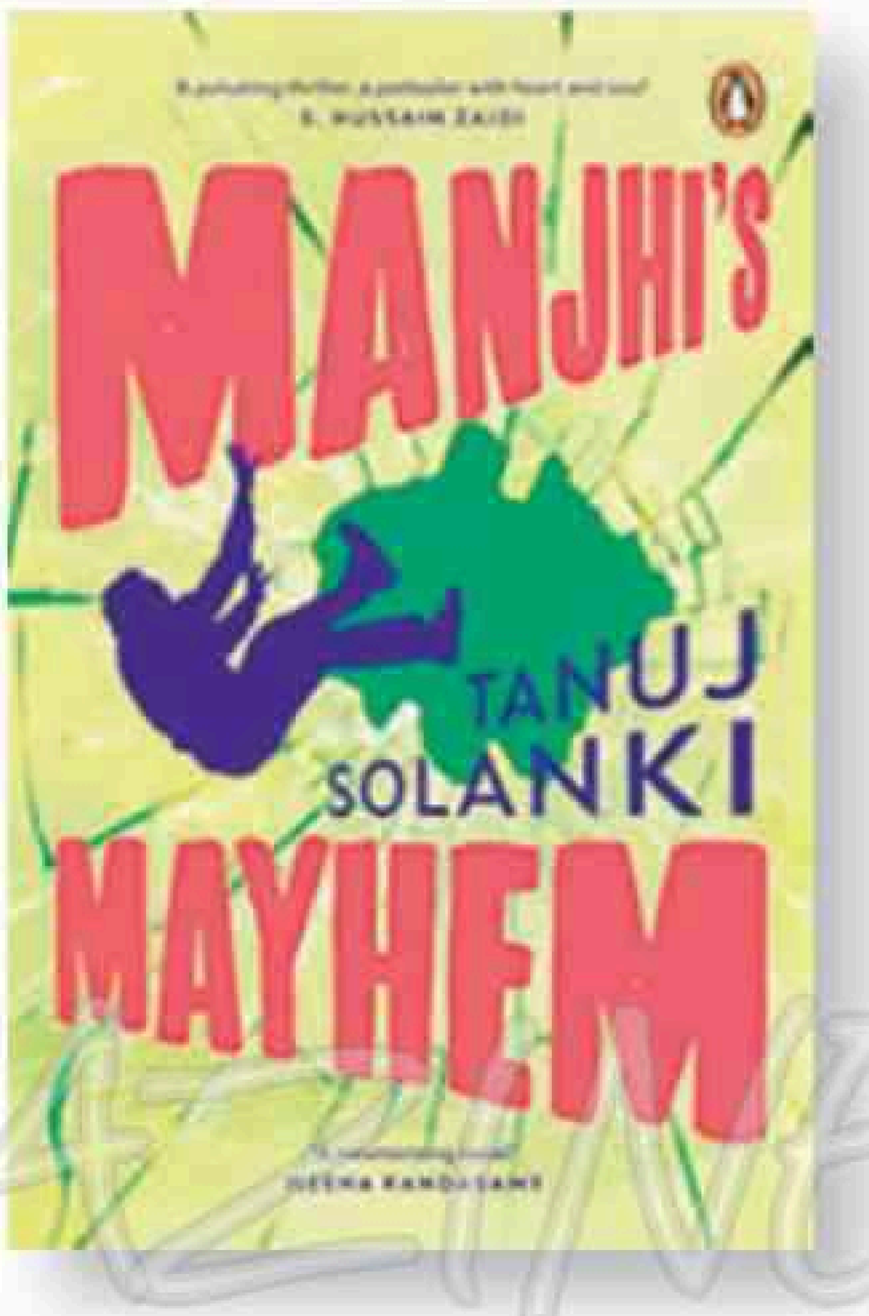
TANUJ SOLANKI is a gifted writer, and with *Manjhi's Mayhem* he has given us a well-written noirish crime thriller set in one of Mumbai's grittier universes. Sewaram Manjhi is the protagonist who is just one step ahead of poverty, straddling the underside of society, and who is not a private detective but a private security guard. He is drawn into danger by a *femme fatale* named Santosh, who similarly straddles the line between the lower middle class and the darkness beneath it. The only difference is that she is upper caste and he is Dalit, though he poses as a Jat from northern India named Harish Jakhar. By the time she finds out, they have already had their steamy encounter:

"Santosh slapped me hard. It stung.

I didn't do anything.

'Bhosdike I'm a Brahmin,' she said. 'Jat was still ok. But Dalit? Shouldn't you have told me earlier?'"

But this matter is a minor sideshow because Santosh has noticed a public display of his physical courage when he thrashed up three youngsters who were troubling a woman customer at his coffee shop. She first offers him unimaginably unrestrained sex, and then gives him a task that involves explosive violence.



Manjhi's Mayhem
By Tanuj Solanki
Penguin
Pages: 216
Price: Rs.399

Sewaram must rough up a man named Godse—chuckle, chuckle—who had earlier threatened to throw acid on her face. Violence against women, and that too against his girl: Sewaram has no hesitation in beating the man to a pulp. Except that during this violent encounter, Godse informs him that things are not what they seem to be: the woman he threatened was not Santosh but an "escort" named Pinky. Things are never what they seem to be in the dusk of noir, where sex is the reward for violence.

Suffice it to say that the rest of the novel is Sewaram's journey, filled with more *maara-piti* (fisticuffs), to unravel the real reason behind Santosh's order to beat up Godse. It involves a crooked banker, a past-his-muscle-prime property dealer, an out-of-sight kingpin who retails ridiculously expensive watches, and various henchmen who cannot measure up to Sewaram's raw physical tsunami. On his side is an elderly sewage worker whose planned suicide is diverted by the promise of vicarious participation in Sewaram's mayhem, a couple of taxi drivers, various finger-licking chicken and mutton dishes, and Santosh's equally *femme fatale* sister (yes, you guessed it), Pinky. You will not complain about the narrative's climax or the book's ending.

"...That's a superhit story, Manjhi," a friend tells Sewaram during these escapades.

"'Superhit, right?'

'Right. It's got sex and money. Nothing better as far as stories go....'"

SUPERIOR WRITING

It is a potboiler with a difference, however, because of Solanki's superior writing. It is engaging and racy. It is insightful and drops an occasional deeper truth into the boiling pot without being overly ponderous and without any purple prose. Solanki's writing made me insecure about my own—was whatever I wrote filled with as much life as his is, or was it inadequate? It reminded me of last year's crime thriller by an accomplished littérateur: *Villainy* by Upamanyu Chatterjee.

One way in which Solanki writes a better genre

JO CHRISTIAN OTERHALS/FLICKR

SEWARAM'S JOURNEY is filled with *maara-piti* (fisticuffs).

novel is the way he etches out the supporting cast. Though they might seem to be recognisable stereotypes, none of them is a cardboard cut-out or a cartoonish character.

Solanki invests each with something that raises them above the usual, and he does this with quick brushstrokes, as an accomplished artist might do. For instance, when Sewaram visits the crooked banker, the banker melts into the background while his wife and daughter come into sharp focus—in rewarding ways for the story.

This is not to say *Manjhi's Mayhem* is perfect. My very minor quibble is that one reads the characters speaking and thinking in English even though Sewaram's narration twice clarifies that the dialogue is in Hindi or Marathi. On at least one occasion, I stopped and wondered: did this character really think such-and-such? At the risk of sounding like a tone-deaf snob, it seemed a bit sophisticated as far as thoughts go. After all, language = thought. One might argue that these thoughts are the English analogues of perfectly valid thoughts in Hindi, but I am not convinced. (This is a constant feature of Amitav Ghosh's novels, where little boys talk as if at their PhD viva voce, an irritant that repels me from his oeuvre.) But as I said, this is a minor quibble about *Manjhi's Mayhem* that should not detract from this otherwise engrossing novel.

LITMUS TEST

The real litmus test of the book is that it made me want to pick up Solanki's other writings: *The Machine is Learning*, which made it to the JCB Prize longlist in 2020, and a short story collection, *Diwali in Muzaffarnagar*, which got him the 2019 Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar Award. In an era when Indian publishing is churning out piles of mediocrity, the fact that you want to read more of a writer is a rarity, and an accomplishment.

That it is a crime thriller is even better, for though India has produced its share of crime writing, from Surender Mohan Pathak's Hindi potboilers (many of which are just rehashes of James Hadley Chase that he translated into Hindi in the 1970s, and that flooded north Indian railway station bookstalls back then), to the serial killers who populate Bhaskar Chattopadhyay's books (pick up his *Patang*), to the endless double-crosses in Ankush Saikia's eight novels, to the historical whodunits by Arjun Raj Gaind, to the tongue-in-cheek mysteries of Bengaluru-based Zac O'Yeah, to the hardboiled detectives of Anita Nair's crime fiction.

> With *Manjhi's Mayhem*, I do not see a show but a movie directed by someone like Anurag Kashyap. I would pay money to watch it.

But it is not enough. Indian crime fiction has not broken out into the international market the way that Scandinavian noir or American true crime has. Additionally, literary agents are after their writers to not write novels but to write TV "bibles" for shows that might interest streaming platforms like Netflix. We live in hope.

Recently, I read a book of true crime stories, V. Sudarshan's *Tuticorin: Adventures in Tamil Nadu's Crime Capital*, which, despite the hyperbolic title, is a fascinating collection of 20 simply told tales. After reading it, my first thought was that it would make for a great series, with eight selected stories fleshed out into episodes. With *Manjhi's Mayhem*, however, I do not see a show but a movie directed by someone like Anurag Kashyap. I would pay money to watch it.

I hope Solanki brings Manjhi back for another adventure. And another. And another. God knows India needs more well-written crime novels. ☐

Aditya Sinha is a writer and journalist based in the NCR.

Running between raindrops

All of us, unconsciously perhaps, have learnt the intricate steps of this dance. How to get where you want to by finding the safe and sweet spots, negotiating all manner of hazards as you wend your way.

BY **GOURI DANGE**

“I RUN BETWEEN THE RAINdrops” was her explanation when we asked one of our schoolteacher nuns how come she never got wet when she crossed the quadrangle in a downpour without an umbrella, while we cowered inside our heavy Duckback raincoats. She could well have used the opportunity to give us some lofty explanation about faith, belief, miracles, blessings, and suchlike, a temptation many a religious person of any hue speaking to a wide-eyed audience would usually not resist.

But she simply told us something more fun, magical, and if not plausible, definitely something that fires young imagination—that it is possible to run between the raindrops. And find yourself home and dry even in the thick of it all.

Coming to think of it, all of us, quite unconsciously perhaps, have learnt the intricate steps of this dance, whether we live in rural India or urban towns and metros. How to get where you want to by finding the safe and sweet spots, negotiating all manner of hazards coming down, springing up, and blindsiding you as you wend your way.

As all our towns and cities feverishly “smarten up”, which leaves citizens smarting in pain, we are learning to find smart solutions to the various things that befall us. We have learnt the art of coming up with the most evasive and defensive forms of getting anywhere.

“Commuting” is a rather bland word to cover the series of stratagems and sheer nimble-footedness that helps us get somewhere while entire bridges are being demolished before the promised roads and rapid transport systems (some already abandoned before being used, stillborn children of a previous phase of the smarts) are in place.

You simply have to learn to run between all kinds of drops—sheer 10-foot drops on the edges of under-construction roads, unmarked, where entire cars can be swallowed whole, or falling debris, or construction rods left sticking out, all the better to impale you with. We are learning to move like chessmen—on the diagonal, or sliding sideways, or in increments of one-and-a-half steps with a deft right-angle swerve.

Various departments involved in pipeline laying, metro building, road broadening, drainage systems, and special digging permission for pandals during our holier-than-thou festivals are like one big unhappy family—no one talks to no one, and will not coordinate their plans. One big game of *katti* (unfriending), with no *batti* (befriending) in sight.

‘WEATHER INCIDENTS’

If the city or region that you live in has faced 300 per cent more rain in one season than ever before in recorded history, you are not just dancing between the raindrops, you are possibly dodging waterfalls and whirlpools, and hanging on to anything solid while the rain floods you out. Couple this with the smart-city excavations, and you’re looking at some serious need of buckets, boats, and bailing outs. This is mostly thanks to the double-whammy of “weather incidents” as it is so delicately called, and a long history of absent urban planning.

The old guard of environmentalists and planners grew hoarse and then aged and are now exiting this planet trying to talk and be heard about the simple but vital issue of

YOU simply have to learn to run between all kinds of drops.

THULASI KAKKAT

planning for water to run off into the god-given natural waterbodies that once were part of any settlement anywhere.

And not in ancient maps of India, but just a few decades ago, in living memory. Now we have to go anywhere dressed for the occasion: prepared to wade through swirling muddy waters, amazingly accumulating even on bridges. And mutter to ourselves *a la* T.S. Eliot: "I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled."

In what other ways are we learning to run between the raindrops? Event organisers have understood that planning an evening of anything, concerts, plays, screenings, protest, parties, talks, inaugurations, launches, is asking for trouble. In place of the 60 people you may have invited, only 6.5 people may make it after being through the ringer of traffic, flash floods, and debris and/or welding sparks falling from above. Sometimes the main performers or speakers at such events themselves do not make it, and the rag-tag lot that does manage to show up settle down to play *antakshari* with each other—surely the lowest common denominator of desultory human discourse.

Increasingly, we see organisers inviting you to attend 9 to 11 am or 2 to 4 pm; or cultural festivals that are all-nighters, to which you travel on city streets late at night and return home at dawn, unimpeded and unharmed. This is a change in convention, to which the populace has begun to say a resounding yes, given that reaching a venue, parking, and emerging become a hundred per cent less challenging.

These kinds of timings find that sweet spot in the course of every harried city's 24 hours. Much wailing and gnashing of teeth can then be avoided on the road. Afternoon ragas can be heard, brunches can be had, something that work-from-home has begun to allow many to do. (Work-from-home itself was a nimble response to the pandemic, a great new way to run between the raindrops.)

> Imagine being able to identify and respond to just the good that comes from a person.

The art of running between raindrops is a useful and elegant one to master and practise in relationships as well. Which is not to say that you learn to be clever and evasive and opportunistic and look out only for yourself. Far from it. Imagine being able to identify and respond to just the good that comes from a person, and just dropping the baggage, the history, the negativity, the aspects of that person that do not work for you. It would be a deft definition of that elusive concept, acceptance.

Whether you are involved with a child, a parent, a spouse or partner, a neighbour, a friend, a colleague, even with oneself, imagine not having to wear that heavy Duckback raincoat, brace yourself, keep your head down, and soldier on in the downpour. Imagine managing to be able to simply find and enjoy the dry spots and work with them. This would free us from seeing and dealing with only the surliness or untidiness of an adolescent, be able to spot and smile at that wacky streak, and run with it.

It would be a way to set aside the all-too-familiar and annoying proclivities of a partner that seem to drown many relationships, and choose to notice and enjoy the interstices, in which other more appealing parts of the person dwell too. On a day that you are particularly floundering in a swamp of self-loathing and censure, if we could find our own warm, safe, and lovable spots (which people close to you do tell you about, and you tend to discount), it would be a way to run between the raindrops.

Does this way of looking at things boil down to that old construct: "Do you see the glass as half-full or half-empty"? Partially, yes, but it is more about actually putting it into action, taking that leap into the downpour and yet getting across home and dry. And enjoying playing catch-me-if-you-can with the rain, on top of it all. As our nimble-footed nun once showed us. ☐

Gouri Dange is a novelist, family counsellor, and author of nine books of fiction and non-fiction.

THE SOUND OF WAVES
KALKI
GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

The Sound of Waves

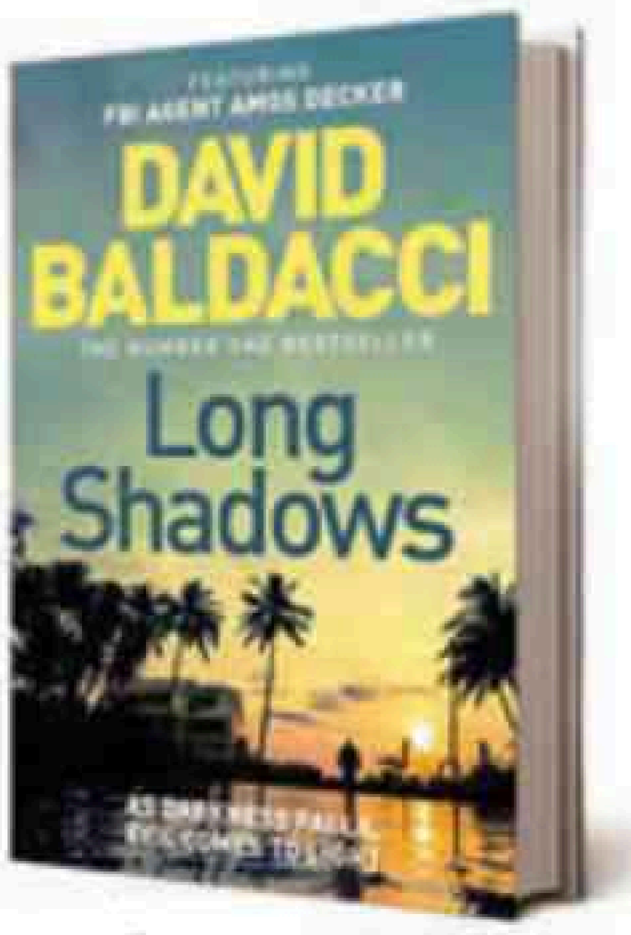
"Kalki" R. Krishnamurthy
Translated by Gowri Ramnarayan
Hachette India
Rs.899

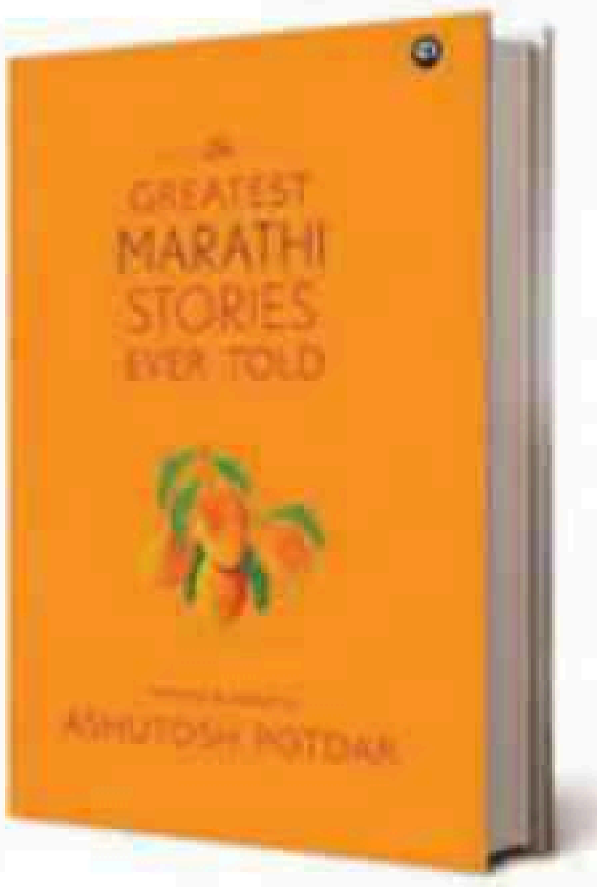
Moving from Thanjavur, Madras, Bombay, New Delhi, and Calcutta to Lahore, Kalki's tour de force follows ordinary people grappling with extraordinary changes in the days leading to Independence as the country fractures, relationships crack, and morality and nationalism are questioned.

Long Shadows

David Baldacci
Macmillan
Rs.699

FBI agent Amos Decker investigates the mysterious murder of a federal judge and her bodyguard at her home in an exclusive, gated community in Florida. Decker must first find the answer to why the judge felt the need for a bodyguard and the meaning behind the strange calling card left by the killer.


FEATURING FBI AGENT AMOS DECKER
DAVID BALDACCI
Long Shadows


THE GREATEST MARATHI STORIES EVER TOLD
ASHUTOSH POTDAR

The Greatest Marathi Stories Ever Told

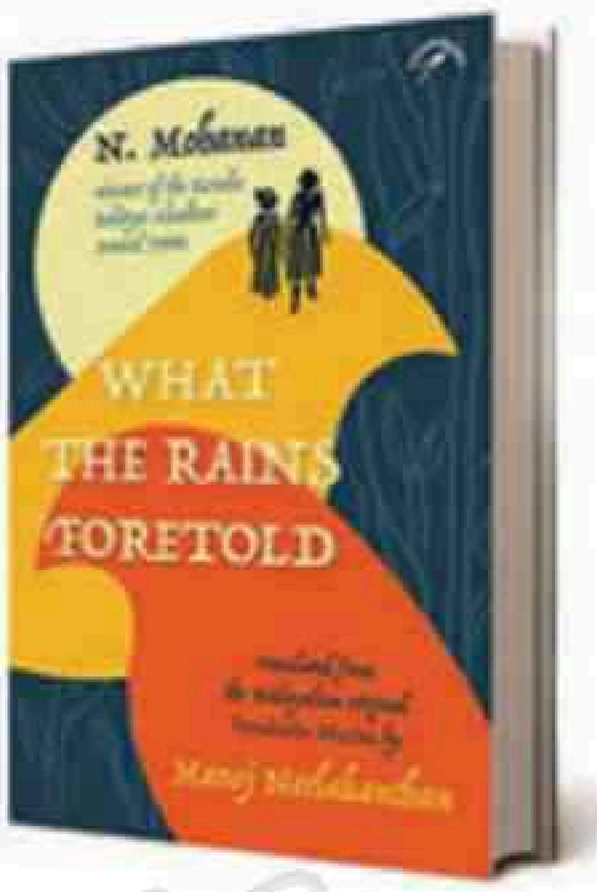
Selected and edited by Ashutosh Potdar
Aleph Book Company
Rs.799

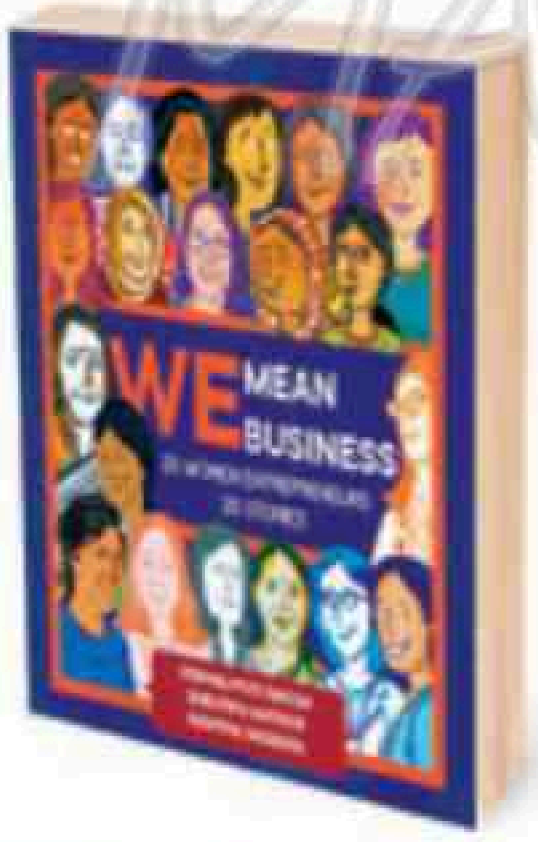
Featuring literary greats such as Gangadhar Gadgil, G. A. Kulkarni, Baburao Bagul, Kamal Desai, Anna Bhau Sathe, and Urmila Pawar, these 28 stories—sarcastic, humorous, elegant, experimental—showcase the range and vibrancy of the Marathi literary tradition.

What the Rains Foretold

N. Mohanan
Translated by Manoj Neelakanthan
Niyogi Books
Rs.395

In this origin story of Kerala, the accomplished scholar Vararuchi seeks to challenge destiny. He forsakes his 12 children in the pursuit of knowledge. The children grow into fine young people, the progenitors of Kerala. The translation makes the age-old tale accessible to a wider audience.


N. Mohanan
WHAT THE RAINS FORETOLD
Manoj Neelakanthan


WE MEAN BUSINESS

WE Mean Business

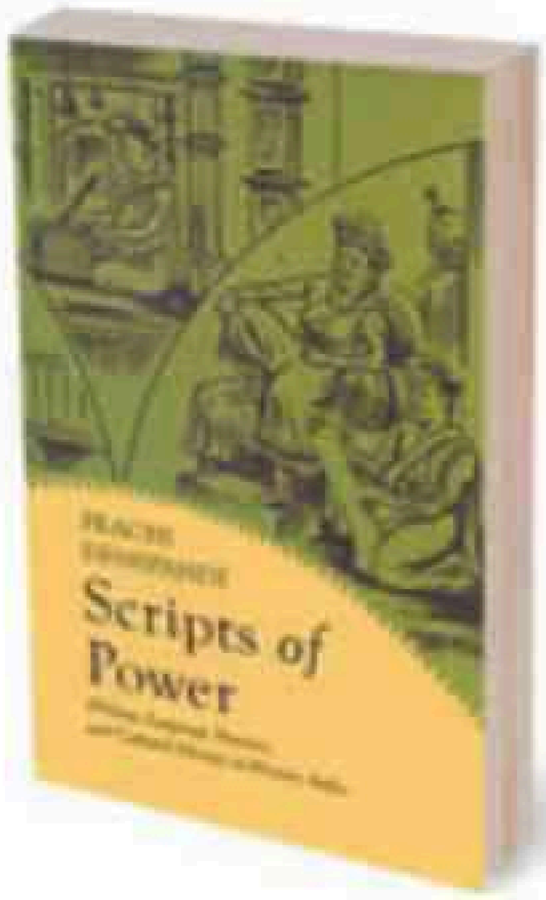
20 Women Entrepreneurs, 20 Stories
Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Shrutika Mathur, & Nishtha Vadehra
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit & Yoda Press
Rs.499

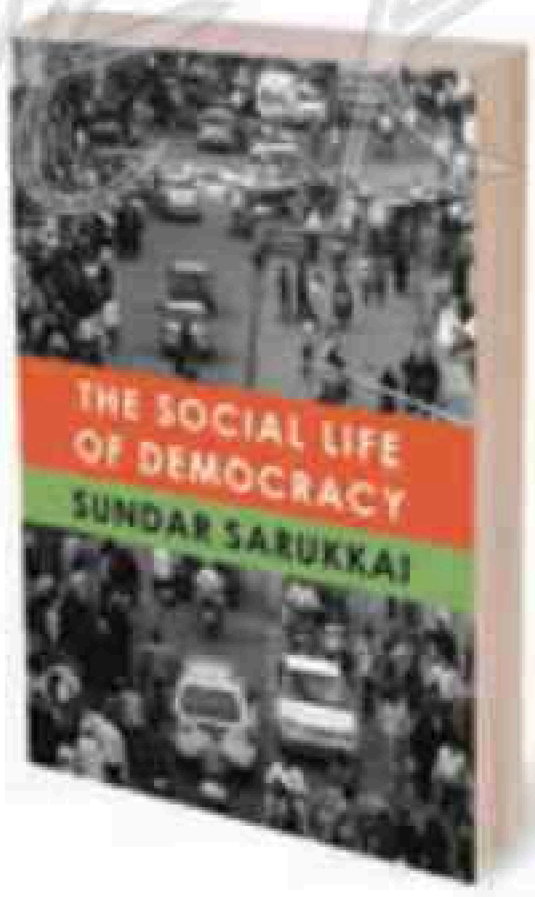
This is an anthology of narratives in graphic format by and of 20 businesswomen from across India who defy expectations to claim their place in the sun.

Scripts of Power

Writing, Language Practices and Cultural History in Western India
Prachi Deshpande
Permanent Black
Rs.995

The focus of this book is the Modi script, a cursive form used for writing Marathi for about 700 years. This cultural history of western India helps us see language as more than a tool of communication—as history and practice.


PRACHI DESHPANDE
Scripts of Power


THE SOCIAL LIFE OF DEMOCRACY
SUNDAR SARUKKAI

The Social Life of Democracy

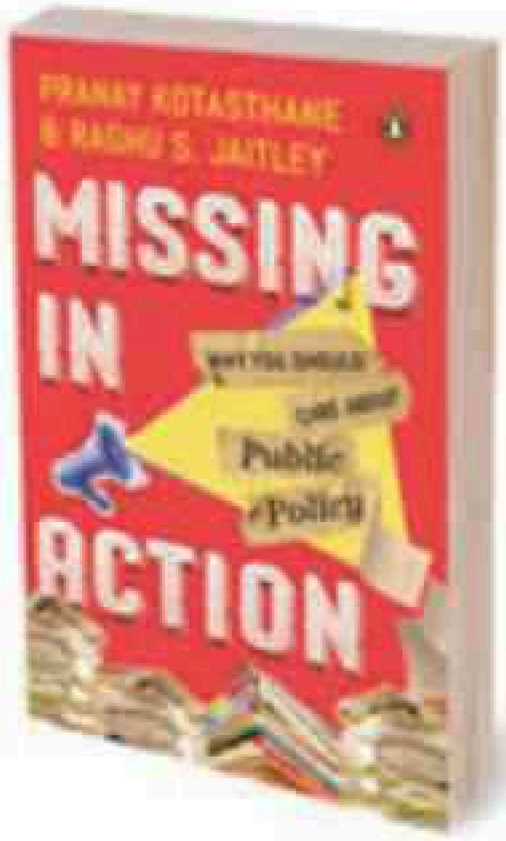
Sundar Sarukkai
Seagull Books
Rs.599

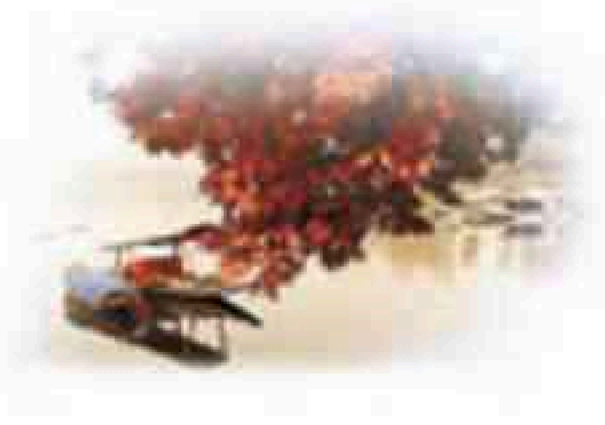
Drawing on B.R. Ambedkar's ideology, philosopher Sundar Sarukkai critically examines the meaning and function of democracy today and argues in favour of bringing democracy into our everyday lives rather than leaving it exclusively to the domain of electoral politics.

Missing in Action

Why You Should Care About Public Policy
Pranay Kotasthane & Raghu S. Jaitley
Penguin
Rs.399

This book about India's tryst with public policymaking explains, using Bollywood references, the fundamental concepts of public policy as well as the logic (or the lack of it!) behind the Indian government's actions, shortcomings, and constraints.


PRANAY KOTASTHANE & RAGHU S. JAITLEY
MISSING IN ACTION
Public Policy



Kashmir **Diary**

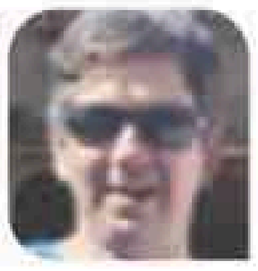
Enigma of arrival

SINCE my last visit to Srinagar, the drive from Sheikh ul-Alam International Airport into the city has become much smoother, I observe. There is a flyover now, which starts from Chanapora and goes all the way to Jahangir Chowk, depositing you in the heart of the city. If you are headed to the houseboats, you can get off midway at Bakshi Stadium. Memories of past arrivals come flooding back. One time the solitary cherry tree outside the airport terminal was blooming with abandon. Another time coincided with the death anniversary of Burhan Wani, and the streets were eerily empty.

The Kashmiris are a beleaguered lot but they are nothing if not stoic and, as always, I am met with warmth and wide smiles. Perhaps the very Kashmiri strain of Sufism has something to do with this.

FALL COLOURS

So, which is Kashmir's most beautiful season? The competition is neck and neck, but my vote goes to autumn. It is truly the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness". There is a delicious slowing down, a turning inwards in preparation for winter. The summer blizzard of tourists is over, and Srinagar can stretch its arms again. The leaves of the chinar tree—which the Sufi saints are said to have brought from Iran—are turning into myriad shades of brown, red, orange, russet, and golden yellow. They shed in the millions in the storied gardens the Mughals left behind and must be religiously swept every day. I walk in Naseem Bagh. Established by Akbar in 1586 and now a campus of the University of Kashmir, it has the largest stand of chinars, incidentally the same species as the Tree of Hippocrates, under which the "father of medicine" taught on the island of Kos in Greece.



Amit Dixit is a travel writer and photographer based in Delhi. He is former editor, *Outlook Traveller.*

The pristine Boulevard Road, which runs along Dal Lake, is always great for a walk, but this time I head into the Zabarwan Hills surrounding Srinagar. I am accompanied by a local naturalist who knows every bird, bush, and tree in sight. No wonder he is off to Mumbai shortly to pick up an award. The mountain air is bracing, as crisp as a Kashmiri apple. I am not sure my inured-to-pollution lungs can take it. My naturalist friend tells me Kashmir's fall colours used to be much richer earlier. That is global warming for you.

The Old City of Srinagar is as charming as ever. Kashmiris love their breads, and the bakeries do brisk business. The smell of *harissa*, a seasonal speciality, wafts in. It is a nutritious gruel of Kashmiri sticky rice, lamb meat (it is always sheep in Kashmir, not goat), and spices, cooked overnight, then finished quite dramatically with smoking mustard oil. Only a smattering of shops in the Old City carry on the tradition. Downtown Srinagar, as the Old City is also called, is bedecked with shrines to Sufi saints, like the exquisite Khanqah-e-Moula on the banks of the Jhelum. Decorated with papier mache, it is one of the finest examples of Kashmiri wooden architecture. On a much grander scale is the Jamia Masjid, its soaring roof supported by 378 wooden columns.

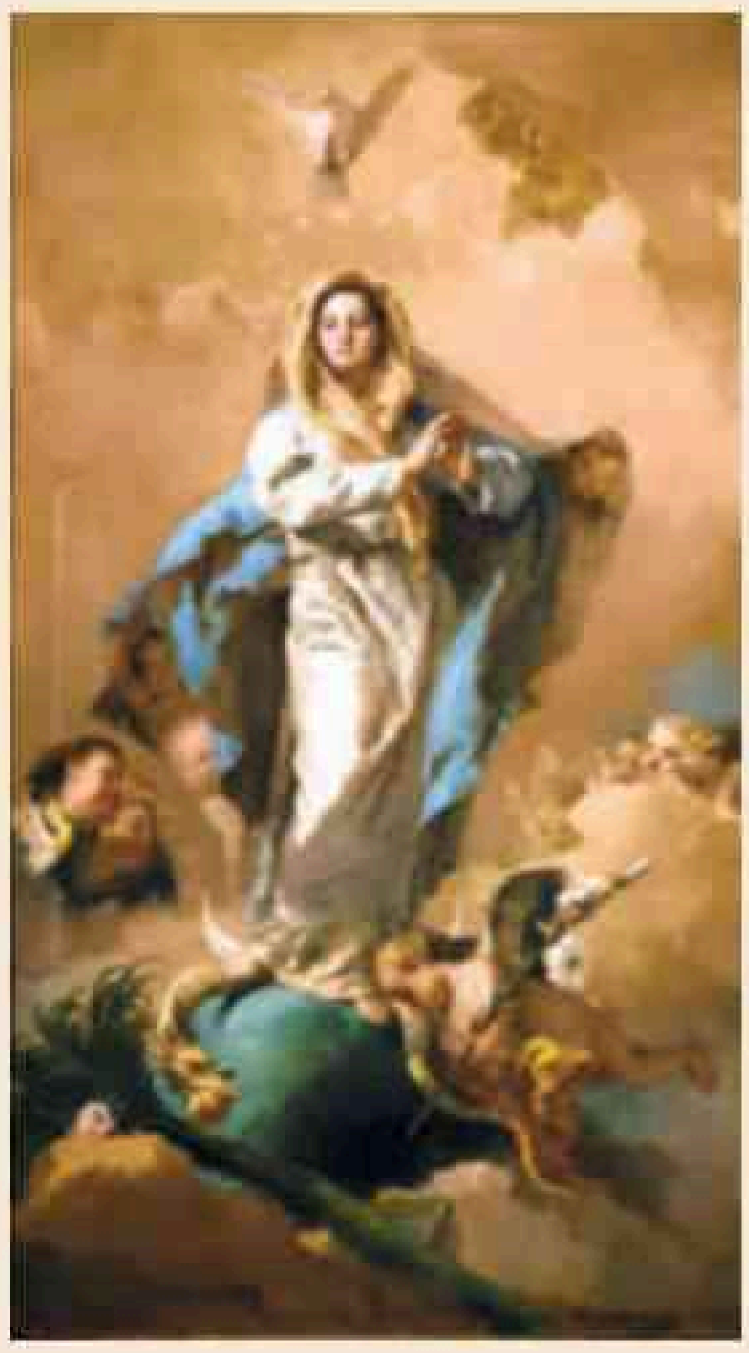
But the shrine I want to see is a modest little one down a quiet street in Khanyar. Roza Bal is believed to be the burial place of a Muslim holy man and sage, Yuz Asaf. In 1899, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, claimed that Yuz Asaf was none other than Jesus Christ. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the shrine. A board outside it quotes from the Quran: "That they [Jews] said in boast we killed Christ Jesus the Son of Mary the Apostle of Allah, but they killed him not nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them..." The Ahmadiyya claim is rather fascinating, but Srinagar seems unbothered by all the fuss and simply goes about its business.

Goodbye seems to be the hardest part, but it is not what you think. Owing to security concerns peculiar to Srinagar leaving paradise is nothing short of hell. As you approach the airport, you must disembark from your vehicle, get your ID and tickets checked, lug your bags into a building for screening, then load them back on your vehicle, before being dropped off at the airport's parking area (no, you are not allowed to drive to the entrance, not unless you are VIP or Army). And it does not matter if you are old, pregnant, or with kids. It is enough to ruin your holiday.

The one thing that Kashmiris do not look forward to is the *chillai kalan*—the harshest 40 days of winter—but it cannot be as bad as this. My advice is always to travel light, but especially in Kashmir, where baggage can weigh you down in every sense of the word.

FLQ THE FRONTLINE QUIZ

Sumant Srivathsan has a day job as a digital marketer, but his true calling is disambiguating football and soccer on the Internet.

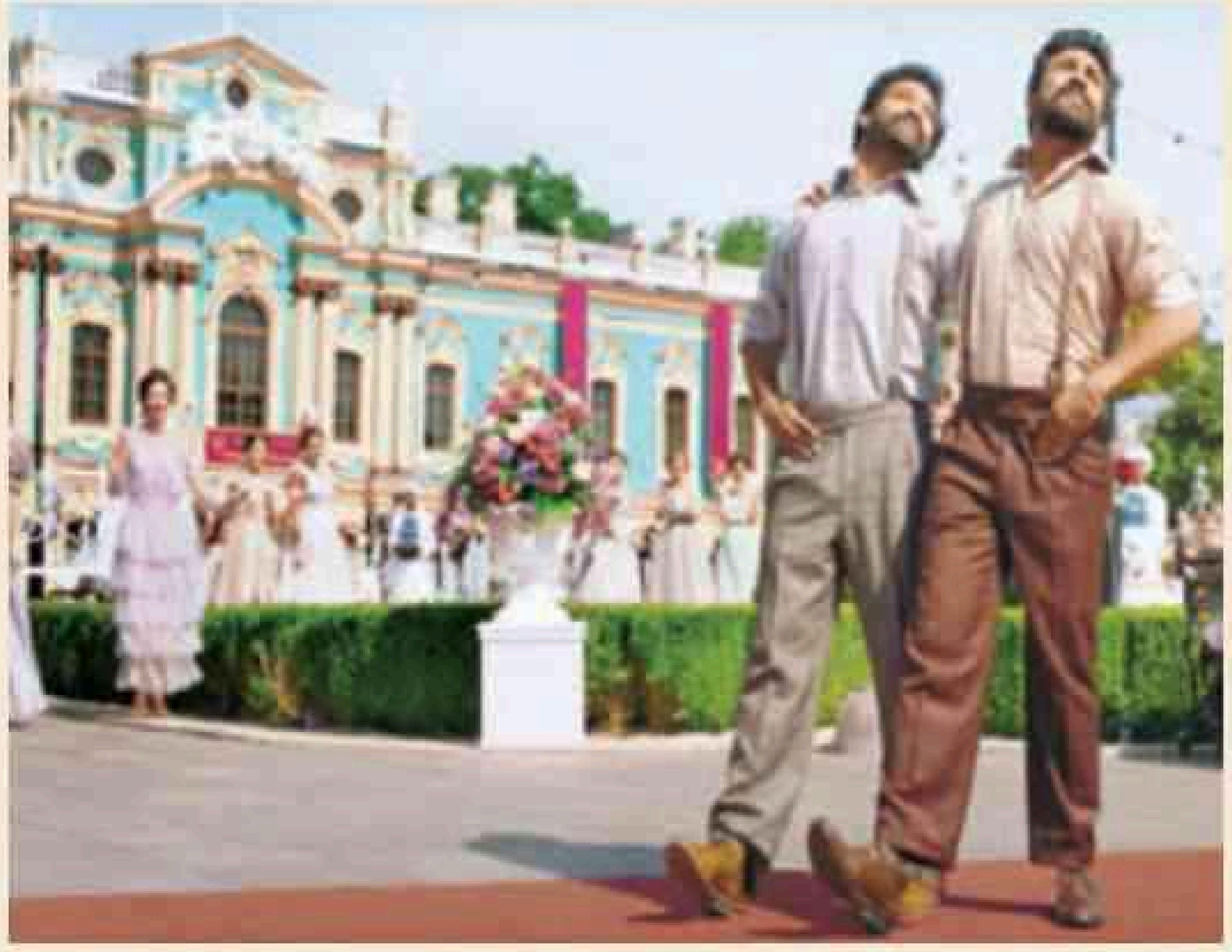


1. What was inspired by this 1757 painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and gained prominence in the early 19th century as a form of support for the erstwhile Spanish monarchy, which Napoleon Bonaparte deposed?

2. Which British television programme forms an integral part of David Nicholls' 2003 novel *Starter for Ten*, in which the protagonist falls in love with a fellow contestant on the programme?

3. What was the name of the Manchester-based band Venom's 1982 album, which dealt with themes of occultism, witchcraft, horrors, and violence, and would become so influential that a whole genre of music was named after it?

4. Who is the current occupant of the building seen in this still from the 2022 film *RRR*?



5. When Paul-Émile Lecoq de Boisbaudran discovered a new element and named it gallium in honour of France, he was accused of trying to name it after himself. A similar reason also explains the use of a symbol by the French Football Federation. What was this reason?

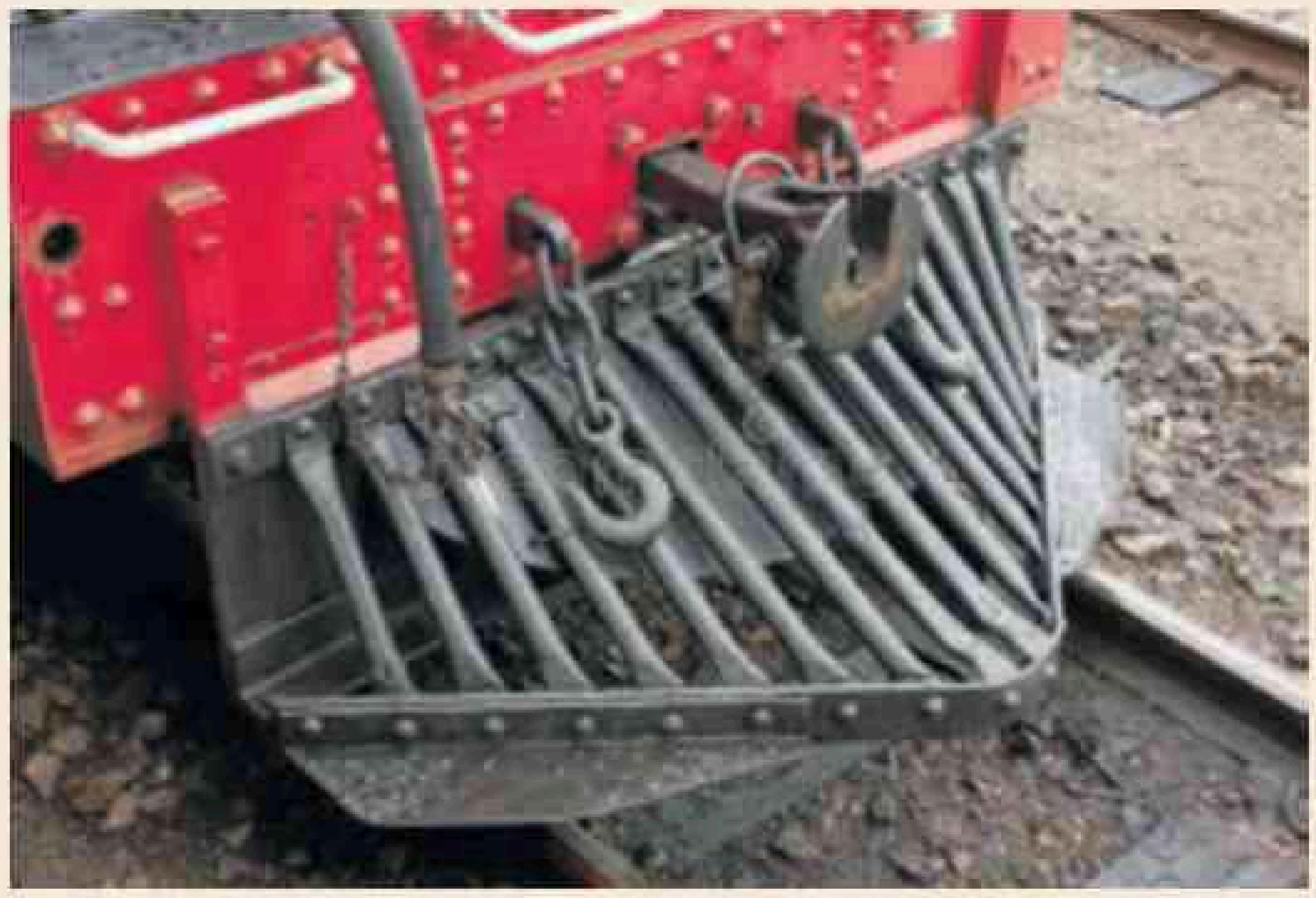
6. On the basis of the Stable Diffusion AI, Seth Forsgren and Hayk Martiros developed an artificial intelligence model that generates music from text prompts. What is this model called; the name combines a concept in music with the original name of the AI?

7. If one were visiting the US Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and were viewing the collection of Otto Vollbehr, what landmark would the staff most commonly use to provide directions to the women's restroom?

8. What is common to the evolution of the terms "love" in tennis and "duck" in cricket, both of which represent scores of zero?

9. What is common to the following: Suzuki Baleno, Yakult, Mirinda, and Movado?

10. What is the term used to describe the structures seen in the front of locomotive engines, originally meant to prevent certain occurrences that have been in the Indian news in recent months?



Answers: 1. The blue and white colours of Argentina/ 2. University Challenge, an intercollegiate quiz show/ 3. Black Metal/ 4. Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine/ 5. Gallus and Lecoq both mean rooster, in Latin and French, respectively/ 6. Riffusion/ 7. "Right behind the Gutenberg Bible"/ 8. Both are derived from eggs: l'oeuf, French for egg, and a contraction of "duck's egg"/ 9. Brand names derived from Esperanto/ 10. Cowcatchers, meant to protect machine and cattle from collisions